Colonialism, Capitalism and Racism

A Postcolonial Chronicle of Dutch and Belgian Practice

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published in 2024 by Amsterdam University Press Ltd.

Published 2025 by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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ISBN: 9789048559916 (hbk)
ISBN: 9781041177203 (pbk)
ISBN: 9781003692805 (ebk)

NUR 740

Cover illustration: *De koloniaal als toean besar* (The colonial as *toean besar*). Source: E.F. von Wechmar, *Delianer. Collectie lithografieën* (Delians: A collection of lithographs), Medan, 1927.
Cover design: Coördesign, Leiden

DOI: 10.5117/9789048559916

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If one sees a handful of powerful and rich people at the pinnacle of opulence and fortune, while the crowd below grovels in obscurity and wretchedness, it is because the former valued the things they enjoy only because others are deprived of them and even without changing their condition, they would cease to rejoice if the people ceased to suffer.
– Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, trans. by Franklin Philip, Oxford, 1994:81)

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Acknowledgements

This book was published earlier in a Dutch edition under a slightly different title.[1] Its altered and updated contents will clarify why I have added 'capitalism' to the new title. Some of the chapters included in the earlier Dutch edition have not been translated into English. Several others appear here in a somewhat changed format while new ones (Chapters 2, 10, 14 and 15) have been added. The prologue and epilogue have been written to strengthen the coherence of the main text and to highlight the focal points binding them together. Six of the chapters were published earlier in the following journals:

- Chapter 3: 'Colonialism and Its Racial Imprint', *Sojourn* 35(3), 2020: 463-92.
- Chapter 4: 'Coolie Labour and Colonial Capitalism in Asia', *Journal of Agrarian Change* 23(2), 2022: 233-46.
- Chapter 8: 'Over Jules Marchal en klokkenluiders die geen gehoor vonden. Kanttekeningen bij de Belgische postkoloniale debatten', *Brood & Rozen*, 2020(3): 32-49 [in Dutch].
- Chapter 10: A shortened version of 'Ethische politiek verbeeld als de christelijke beschavingsmissie: Alexander Willem Frederik Idenburg, een Nederlandse koloniaal met goede bedoelingen?', *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 138(3), 2023: 63-92.
- Chapter 14: 'A Change for the Better? Dutch Development Aid in Good Times and Bad Times', *Development and Change* 42(3), 2011: 833-48.
- Chapter 15: 'W.F. Wertheim: een tegendraadse kroniekschrijver van maatschappelijke omwenteling', *Tijdschrift Sociologie* 12(3), 2016: 321-50 [in Dutch]; 'W.F. Wertheim: A Sociological Chronicler of Revolutionary Change', *Development and Change* 48(5), 2017: 1130-53.

Finally, I found the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam and the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research at the University of Amsterdam willing to equally share the cost of this open access edition. Their expressed generosity demonstrates my long-standing association with both institutes.

1 *Kolonialisme en racisme. Een postkoloniale kroniek*. Amsterdam University Press, 2021.

Foreword

The trajectory of my social science research started at the beginning of the 1960s with anthropological fieldwork in India and writing on the colonial history of Indonesia. Local-level fieldwork on labour relations which I observed in the contemporary setting of these postcolonial societies and economies was combined by tracking and tracing my findings in their historical context as well as in a micro-macro perspective. The major argument running through the chapter scheme is intended to highlight how the colonial question and its racist tenets have prevented the social question from being posed and solved. My investigations focused on the plight of labour in the voluminous bottom ranks of the working classes of South and Southeast Asia in both past and present. It is a problematic which has urged me to focus on the intrusion of capitalism in the fierce exploitation and suppression of labour rights. The use of force in tying down workers to toil for their survival was, after the abolition of slavery,sustained in a more contractual bind than had been instituted in the precolonial form of servitude.[1] The tendency of capitalism in its naked form to prevent the labour it requires from living and working in freedom was further effectuated and complemented by resorting to the colonial power of the multinational state. The coercive regimentation which resulted has remained intact in the aftermath of decolonization mainly but not only in the Global South.

On my retirement from the chair in comparative sociology at the University of Amsterdam in 2001, I continued doing grassroots research in the rural and urban sites of my earlier rounds of fieldwork in both India and Indonesia. A decade and a half later, advancing age meant I was no longer able to continue with this method of participant observation for collecting data. I switched to the full-time study of history. In 2013, the International Institute of Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam offered me its hospitality as an honorary fellow, an invitation which I gratefully accepted. It allowed me to make use of office space and services, participate in the programme of activities and easy access to the excellent collection of publications and archives in the institute's library. My much appreciated association with the IISH has encouraged me to continue my scholarly life. About half of the essays included in the book were written during the tenure of my fellowship over the past decade. Many of the chapters which were also included in the

1 Jan Breman, *Fighting Free to Become Unfree Again: The Social History of Bondage and Neo-Bondage of Labour in India*. New Delhi, 2023.

Dutch edition have been elaborated upon in an updated version, translated or edited by Andy Brown. Acknowledgement of my indebtedness to the platform of academic work that I was allowed to join and benefit from would be incomplete without an endnote on the home front. I am indebted to Ilse for the love, care and companionship with which she has enriched my life.

Amsterdam, September 2023

Prologue: The Formative Impact of Childhood: Life Experiences in a Comparative Setting of Time and Space

The introduction argues that the identity of the social scientist is of crucial relevance in considering his or her options to engage in research. To decide where to go, what to do and how to accomplish it. Targeting my investigations on the dispossessed classes of labour in India was not a decision taken on the spur of the moment, a random choice picked out of many. but inspired by my own background and childhood history from the mid-1930s to the mid-1950s. Did it make me a biased observer? What I find important as a guideline in doing research is to remain alert to one's own subjectivity and on the basis of that awareness persevere in the attempt to falsify one's preconceived ideas, to argue against the grain, to question one's own set of norms and values and in that painstaking endeavour, to aim for a higher degree of objectivity. To achieve this with a modicum of success makes it imperative not only to talk and listen to informants but to remain critically engaged in constant dialogue with one's own biased choices and in doing that, bring the hidden script to the fore.

When back in 1962 I started to conduct anthropological research in rural India, most of my time in the field was spent asking questions, both pertinent and impertinent ones. On many occasions I had, in similar fashion, to deal with counter-queries from my interlocutors. Who I was, why I had come, and what I was up to. It was a tit for tat which did not allow me to go into hiding behind a façade of privacy and innocence. In this ongoing cross-examination, the underlying assumption often was that I belonged to the privileged part of humanity brought up in wealth and splendor. After all, according to the stereotyped notion people hailing from *vilayat* (which was my kind of country) all shared in the comfort and prosperity that were the fruits of an industrial-urban way of life. Actually, I happened to grow up in a milieu bothered by material deprivation. As a young boy, I came to know what it meant to belong to a social class having to cope with poverty. It seemed a stroke of irony that, when I came to India to investigate the dire plight of a landless class of agricultural labour and their dependency on main landowners, it brought back memories of my own past. For sure, these reminiscences were not coloured by the heartrending immiseration that I encountered in the slums of rural Gujarat. At night, scribbling down what

I had seen and heard, the stark difference between my life experiences at a tender age and the destitution of the people in the countryside of Gujarat who had become my focal point of study, brought home to me the formative impact of my childhood.

Settling down from footloose livelihood

From the beginning of the twentieth century, by leaps and bounds, life had started to become better for most people in the Netherlands although the spread of social progress was very uneven. My father and mother belonged to families of bargees who plied the rivers, canals, lakes and inland seas of our country in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, carrying freight such as potatoes and apples, peat (fuel for household heating) or bricks, sand and gravel used for construction. The restructuring of the economy away from rural locales to urban growth poles started to accelerate towards the end of the nineteenth century. The turning tide went together with a shift from a predominant mode of petty commodity production to large-scale industry and big business. Infrastructural development altered the existing fabric of communication and facilitated motorized transport along railroads and highways. Breaking through rurality and parochiality, it led to dispossession and downward social mobility for vulnerable parts of the workforce, such as small or landless peasants, craftsmen making products which were no longer required and other rural folk with occupational identities – among them boatmen – who had become redundant in the reshaped economy. The proletarianization process that followed and which turned the majority of them into an urban class of regular wage earners, paradoxically improved rather than worsened their economic condition. It was an outcome induced by political assertion from below which in a gradual process of democratization allowed for raising and settling the social question. The progress made climaxed in the welfare state around the middle of the twentieth century. This emancipatory trend, to no less extent paid for by squeezing the labouring poor in the colonies to bare survival, remained firmly restricted to the imperial homeland. People's livelihoods only slowly and haltingly improved for the lower segments of the workforce.

Together with most of their siblings both my father and mother had gone ashore early in the twentieth century to join the urban labour market as young adolescents. Lolkje arrived in Amsterdam when she was barely eleven years old, and started her working life as a day-and-night domestic. Speaking only her own dialect, she exchanged her Frisian identity (from the

northernmost region in the country) to Lena, a pure and proper working-class name in the big city. Willem first roamed around in several casual jobs, applied for training in a craft but was then for four years drafted into compulsory military service during the World War I. On his return to civil life he became and remained a postman until his retirement age. Preceded by two sisters I joined this nuclear family in a working-class neighbourhood as the last child and the only son.

We lived on the first floor of a multi-storey house block in a rented apartment which contained three cramped rooms plus a kitchen. It was already a much better dwelling than the two rooms with a privy but no flush toilet in which my parents began their married life in the early 1920s. Then, each morning they had to carry a bucket downstairs to the street for what was called the Boldoot cart (named after a well-known brand of eau de cologne) sent around by the municipality to collect the night soil. On Friday evening, all of us would go to the public bathhouse to take a shower, and on that day mother would give us a fresh set of clothes and underwear to last for the next half week. Boys, in particular, spent many hours of the day roaming around outside simply because of the lack of space indoors. For girls, there always was some household chore to keep them busy and indoors. The apartment blocks on both sides of the street where I was born in 1936 had four floors. Our neighbours worked as waiters, mill hands, lorry drivers, tram conductors, linesmen, construction workers, rent collectors, coal heavers, travelling salesmen, seamstresses, etc. Social life was embedded in this neighbourhood and children as well as adults rarely ventured during their hours of leisure into districts of the city inhabited by the better-off classes. The state-run elementary school I went to was around the corner. It was also attended by boys and girls from the other end of our long street, which towards the end degraded into a slum. In addition to lacking maintenance, the shabby habitat in these back quarters, had other unsavoury traits such as garbage in the streets, dwellings lacking maintenance. broken families, in-house fights as well as brawls outdoors, boozing during off-hours and petty crime. Basic education was not only opening new horizons but was also meant to instil discipline. Every now and then, the teacher would check our hair for lice, inspect our hands for cleanliness, berate us for showing 'lowly behaviour', such as the use of slang, swear words and foul language. We had a rich repertoire for which we were made to rinse our mouth with soap. When I turned nine, I was treated for scabies, a poverty-related affliction.

What stood out in the urbanized landscape of the working class during the early decades of the twentieth century was the gradual fading away of jobs which carried the load of subservience separating the lower echelons

from the better-off ones. It implied a deference made manifest in a wide variety of menial tasks performed in the residences of the well-to-do as coachman, maid, groundsman, skivvy, cook, scullion, footman; or at work sites as porter, bag and file carrier, messenger, concierge, janitor, usher, lift boy, cloakroom helper, and other peon-like figures. More generally it went together with a growing formalization of employment. To explain this phase in the struggle for social emancipation only in terms of the rising price of labour would not do justice to the growing respectability of the working class pointing to a change in the economic, social, political and cultural balance between high and low. No doubt, the work maid did not disappear, as I noticed in the case of my mother. Her relationship with the households where she found employment became less personal and more contractual and detached. No longer did she bring food items, hand-me-down clothes or other leftovers when she came home at the end of the day. She was now upgraded, solicited first as domestic help, and later on as caretaker. A major segment of the labour force found jobs in the much expanded public sector of economy and society. Even in the lower ranks of the government apparatus, employees such as my father found protection and security in the terms of their service gained by becoming members of a trade union. Our way of life was still precarious rather than comfortable, more so because of the severe crisis in the 1930s in the midst of which I was born. The state budget, out of which my father got paid, spiralled down but although he suffered multiple wage cuts, at least his regular job was not taken away. 'For me, steady work meant steady poverty', was how he summed up to me his assessment of those grim years.

A very meaningful change which came about around the middle of the twentieth century was that poverty did not any longer seem to carry the stigma of denigration. Essentially it meant the end of the ideology of inequality. Living in dire circumstances tended to be no longer belittled for what was now considered as adverse and unfair life chances, missed opportunities or simple bad luck. The urge to resort to what in sociological jargon is known as 'passing for', hiding one's background in order to claim and benefit from a loftier social identity, has never been part of my self-presentation. People lagging behind in modal income and consumption were no longer blamed for not being up to the mark. Trying to make ends meet, the course which my parents dutifully steered throughout their working lives, was not something for which one ought either to feel ashamed or brag about. Indigence, or at least not being able to enjoy all kinds of extras and comforts, was a mere fact of life taken for granted in day-to-day behaviour as well as in interactions with the outside world.

The insistence on the basic equality of all citizens did not mean, of course, that class boundaries had become obsolete. The sharp edge may have got blunted both in the public and private spheres but social and cultural distinctions, which found expression in a diversity of lifestyles, were very much kept intact. However, not family descent but education and occupation were henceforth the main markers of class hierarchy. A textbook that I had to read as an undergraduate student in the social sciences ranked the social pecking order which split up Dutch society around the middle of the twentieth century. The divide between the well-bred and ill-bred was not abrogated but reaffirmed, now justified under the debatable banner of the merit an individual might possess or gain.

At school

Schooling had become the main determinant of upward mobility but that insight, if at all comprehended by children, did not really help them in finding their way around once they had learnt how to read and write. The problem of what to do next and where to go was not theirs to solve. Also, parents equipped with hardly any schooling stood by helplessly when the moment came to decide for their offspring that enough was enough or whether to reach up and take the next step on a long, very complicated and nebulous route ahead. In addition to the primary school-leaving certificate, the advice the teacher gave usually decided whether or not to proceed. Half of my classmates, boys as well girls, were all for throwing in the towel, having completed their basic learning after six years, and dropping out was indeed what they did. The other half went for advanced training in various directions. One segment plodded on for one more year or so until they reached the minimum age limit set at 14, for being officially permitted to engage in waged work. Many boys opted for vocational school in order to be trained for three years as craftsmen. Girls, unwilling to abort learning immediately – among them my two sisters – went to attend a school which provided a two-year course, instructing them in domestic skills such as cleaning, sewing, cooking, washing, etc., to prepare for their future role as housewives. A handful of children were permitted to register themselves in secondary school. In consultation with the teacher, this was also my training for the next four years because my parents suspected, quite rightly so, that I was not savvy enough to get skilled in one of the crafts. At this juncture, there was already a crucial split into two streams. The choice between them had far-reaching consequences for later entry into the labour

market. The curriculum of the lower secondary school, referred to in Dutch as 'extended lower education', took three or four years. Its pupils were trained for a wide variety of low-grade jobs in the service sector or in the bottom ranks of administration. My neighbourhood school was still in the early 1960s listed in Amsterdam as the largest primary school, exclusively attended by working-class children. Out of the bunch of more than one hundred children who had finished together with me this elementary training in 1948, only two were enrolled for five or six years in the higher secondary school which after five or six years qualified them for higher grade white-collar jobs. But after a year, they were back in our midst, having failed miserably to move on to the next standard. We were not surprised since, in our class-based view, they had crossed a bridge too far, setting out for a station in life that was beyond their reach.

When I had successfully completed the lower secondary school, strong pressure was put on my parents to get me enrolled in a higher one. As it happened in those instances, teachers were the promoters of upward mobility. They often projected on their pupils aspirations which they had failed to realize themselves. With their support I managed to pass an entrance test but lost two years, because I got admission only at junior level to make up for what I had missed out in the earlier curriculum. The rigid ceilings which were fixed in educational trajectories were clearly meant to demarcate boundaries between the higher and lower social orders. Crossing those barriers was tolerated but at a high price which, in my case. was borne by my parents. Burdened as they were with a wayward son, still not wanting to start working and become a wage earner like his street friends and school mates. I had the temerity to aim for even greener pastures when, after passing the final examination of the higher secondary school with commendable distinction, I easily gave in to the persuasion coming again from the teaching staff to register as a student of the up-and-coming social sciences at the University of Amsterdam.

Apart from adding to the household income, now the cost of advanced education also had to be faced. I applied for a scholarship for which children of employees in the state postal service were eligible. My request was turned down because funding so far had been spent on sons or daughters of Class II and III officials employed by this public agency. It was unheard that the son of a mere postman, a Class IV servant, could qualify for the facility. The panel of high-ranking officials before which I was asked to appear for a formal hearing decided after questioning me in detail to reject my application. Even if I would he fortunate enough to complete my studies with graduation, the gap extracting me from my parental background would become too big,

and result in alienation on both sides of the familial fence. Not wanting to dishearten me, I was given the offer of joining a course for training as a clerk in the lower ranks of the postal service, which I declined. The verdict was that in my own best interest, limits had to be set on my aspirations.

So I began my university education by combining work and study, each half time. It was an uneasy compromise which ended when the Ministry of Education came forward with a scheme of study loans for deserving cases as part of a range of social benefits provided by the welfare state. The interest-free loan I received was a turning point which enabled me to pay my parents at least for food and lodging. The kind of secondary school certificates I had on my enrolment in university excluded the choice for registration in many faculties, such as law, medicine or the humanities. History would actually have been my first option but that was out of the question because I had not been taught the classical languages, Greek and Latin, deemed to be mandatory for study of the past. However, the social sciences did not have that restrictive clause. As a new discipline, it happened to be an open field, a faculty not already occupied by the right of heritage from which sons and daughters of the bourgeoisie stood to benefit. I have no reason to regret the academic path that I have followed, but would it be possible to do it all over again if I had to make a fresh start? I am not so sure.

Looking back and ahead

As a young boy I witnessed the eclipse of the legitimacy of inequality but now, in my old age, a clear regression has occurred in the trend towards social emancipation that materialized during the short twentieth century in my part of the world. Besides, was it really a levelling down of life chances between the social classes in the past decades? One text book impressed me when I was an undergraduate student, because of its apt comment on the passage paved to upward mobility. Close to the middle of the twentieth century, the German sociologist Theodor Geiger focused his research on the question of social inequality. He published his findings in a case study which, translated in English, was entitled *Social Restructuring in a Danish Middletown* (Geiger 1951). On the basis of empirical investigations he reported a major expansion of the economy and society in the ongoing transition to an industrial-urban way of life. However, while the space in which citizens were able to manoeuvre themselves around had much increased, he argued that the relative distance between the social classes had by and large remained the same. There are reasons to qualify his findings but one needs also to

reconsider the accepted wisdom of an accelerated upward mobility in all walks of life. Indeed. there is ample ground to critically examine the claim of an ever-increasing levelling down of the social class distribution politically solidified in a democratized framework around the heartland of the Western world (Bourdieu 1984). It is the assumption of a past trajectory which is even more problematic to surmise as the globalized pathway to the future. Another German sociologist, Karl Mannheim, who like Geiger went abroad to escape the Nazi regime in his homeland, authored a seminal treatise on the collapse of modern civilization and the need to plan for a new and better future. In 1936 he wrote: 'The fact that our thinking is determined by our social position is not necessarily a source of error. On the contrary, it is often the path to political insight' (Mannheim 1936: 111). André Beteille, one of India's main sociologists, similarly phrased this point of view when reporting on his village fieldwork. 'It has by now become a truism that full objectivity in the social sciences is beyond attainment' (Beteille 1965: 12). In other words, who you are and what you have witnessed and experienced matters in investigating and coming to terms with the world around.

My parents' arrival in Amsterdam early in the twentieth century was a major feature of the process of change which Dutch society experienced. Coming to the city nearly always went accompanied by occupational change. This often meant factory employment though in my perception, the close connection between urbanization and industrialization was not entirely justified. Certainly, a large part of the labour force was employed in manufacturing and this left its mark on life and work in the big cities. The transformation to a post-industrial economy has brought about significant shifts in the sectoral distribution of labour, a trend that continued in subsequent decades. That change, together with the pivotal role of capital in this process, had far-reaching consequences for the assertion, organization and representation of labour. The foregoing account makes it clear, however, that the public sector has played an important part in urban employment already at an early stage and determined the character of many neighbourhoods. I have elaborated on the decline of poverty in the economic, social and political restructuring taking place in many parts of the Western world during the first three-quarters of the twentieth century. This process was erratic because the quality of life improved not steadily but by fits and starts, stagnating and even regressing in bad times of economic depression. The improvements in public health that came about in the long term were expressed in decreasing infant mortality and a much longer lifespan – the result of more widely available high-quality food, improved personal hygiene, sanitary facilities and, above all, medical care and the financial capacity to

make use of it. With the slow rise in wages for the working class came the beginnings of a solution to the social problems generated by the industrial revolution. Regular and regulated work based on an employment contract were the prominent features of the political economy that emerged. Working conditions became less oppressive than before as the result of a number of provisions, including a minimum wage, protection against hazardous or dangerous work, the introduction of compulsory education, a shorter working day, extra pay for overtime, annual and weekly holidays, a ban on random dismissal, the possibility of objecting to dictates by management, and a variety of other measures that considerably strengthened the rights of labour. These improvements were the result of collective action and workers who were not organized also benefited. No less important for this stronger bargaining position was the higher level of education and training of the working population. Social housing and greater opportunities for spending their free time underscored the rising standard of living of the urban proletariat, in particular. The introduction of a wide assortment of social provisions – such as paid sick leave and public insurance to cover the cost of medical treatment, the right to a pension, benefits for the unemployed and the disabled, an allowance for widows and orphans and, after World War II, child benefits and an old-age pension – extended to all the members of a worker's family and made an important contribution to increased household security. This is what was known in the righteous jargon of politics and policy as social care 'from the cradle to the grave'. What I have become thoroughly aware of while writing this account is the advent and establishment of an extensive public sector as the manifestation of the principle of social regulation which penetrated the sphere of life and work. The first steps in this direction were taken in the early years of the twentieth century, with the introduction of municipal public utilities for gas, water and light, as well as sewage systems, sanitation departments, the postal service, public transport, housing cooperatives, social insurance for healthcare and cost-free education. These early features of the public economy were gradually expanded to become a full-scale welfare state. It was a development irrevocably connected with the advent of public institutions, public space, public representation and the capacity for public action.

For the working class, a period of social emancipation started around the middle of the twentieth century, a process that was also visible in the life and work of two generations of my family, that of my parents and of myself. The progress that was achieved was not limited only to a rise in purchasing power and access to a wide range of consumer goods. Was this growing prosperity accompanied by a closing of the gap between the better

and less well off? Or did the economy expand without the relative distance between the social classes becoming smaller? Opinions are divided on this question, but my own experience tends to confirm the former viewpoint. Due to intervention, upward mobility became possible in what had been a tightly stratified society. From this perspective, a process unfolded that came down to a reduction in social inequality, structurally, culturally and institutionally. The huge public sector that emerged was indicative of a modest trend towards social levelling that led not only to the eradication of severe poverty but even more so of unbridled wealth. At both extremes, public display of either deprivation or excessive opulence was considered embarrassing. The dynamics of progress meant that the equalizing force that enabled the working class to accede to the now much broader middle class also prevented a well-to-do upper layer in the latter ranks from rising far above it. In one of the first textbooks I encountered at university, I came across a 'ladder' ranking the occupations in Dutch society. At the top stood professors and the mayors of big cities. The positions at the bottom were reserved for postmen and refuse collectors. The accompanying lectures informed me that this stratification was not only outdated but also that upward social mobility rendered such a list irrelevant. Politicians told their voters that 'they never had it so good' – and for that moment they appeared to be right.

In denial of the social question in its global incarnation

Gratification for this 'great leap forward' was short-lived. The tide of progress had already begun to reverse during the last quarter of the twentieth century. The regression was not only economic, but also social and rank inequality has come back with a vengeance. It is too early to take stock of this downturn in development and difficult to predict how it will play out in the future. What is referred to as the 'economic crisis' bears witness to a fundamental shift in the capital-labour balance. The sharp rise in unemployment is being accompanied by a shift from permanent to casual labour, the replacement of time-based wages by piecework, occupational multiplicity, and strong encouragement of self-employment and self-reliance. The economy of informality which has acquired the upper hand has also led to the crimping or even dismantling of the welfare state. What is heralded as the 'participative society', imposed from above by the political establishment, is meant to reward individual merit and rejects solidarity – and thereby the ability to appeal to it as the glue that holds society together.

The neoliberal determined turnaround signifies a denial of the main principles of social democracy. The consequences are already visible. Resilience has turned into vulnerability and extreme wealth is once again juxtaposed by deep poverty. Both are represented by classes which give the impression of being extracted from the social mould. At the top, this exclusion is voluntary, while at the bottom it is enforced. The public sector – healthcare, education, housing, utilities, communication and transport – has been downsized or, to be more exact, became privatized. The post offices are closed and the services they provided are now delivered by private businesses. The collective action which was the organizing principle of social struggle has been replaced by rivalry based on ethnicity, race or creed. Downgraded neighbourhoods are inhabited by 'alien folk', newcomers from elsewhere further away than our own backyard. They have flooded into the country and have to find their way in a social order that aims to reject them as beyond the pale of inclusion. While the benefits of the free market are fulsomely praised, the high costs to society are blatantly dismissed. 'More' and 'less' once again mean 'better' and 'worse', 'higher' and 'lower'.

Given my background, could I have aimed for access to higher education in this current climate? The costs and the risks entailed might have prevented me from having the guts. Would my parents – appreciative of the comforts they came to enjoy at old age but now branded as 'over-care' – have spent their final years in contentment? The popular mood is no longer assessed – as it was in the not too distant past – bright and shining. Then, it seemed that a better future was waiting for mankind at large; now we fear for what will be ahead. The feeling of gloom and doom is not lifted by turning our gaze to the Global South. In many parts of the world the swelling classes of dispossessed people, redundant to demand in the labour market, are stuck in a pauperized existence far out of political sight and care of public relief (Breman 2023a and 2023b). The social assertion and progress which alleviated the misery of the working and non-working poor in the Western world during the first three-quarters of the twentieth century has remained absent for the bottom classes of most countries in the Southern Hemisphere. Their subalternity was left intact and became more intense under colonial rule. Commenting on the growing gap which came about when globalization started to accelerate, Beteille articulated why and how these pathways had diverged:

> [No major civilization has ever fully excluded a concern for equality, and that inequality – not only the fact of inequality but the need to explain and justify it – bedevils every modern civilization. I draw attention to the

> paradox that Western societies were acquiring a new and comprehensive commitment to equality at precisely that juncture in their history when they were also developing in their fullest form the theory and practice of imperialism. (Beteille 1983: 4)

The crisis of modern civilization which in the face of a totalitarian upswing drove Karl Mannheim close to a century ago to urge for a fundamental restructuring of man and society signals a warning no less relevant and now in the globalized economic and social order of today.

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Part I

Imperialism, Its Ideology and Practice of Racial Inequality

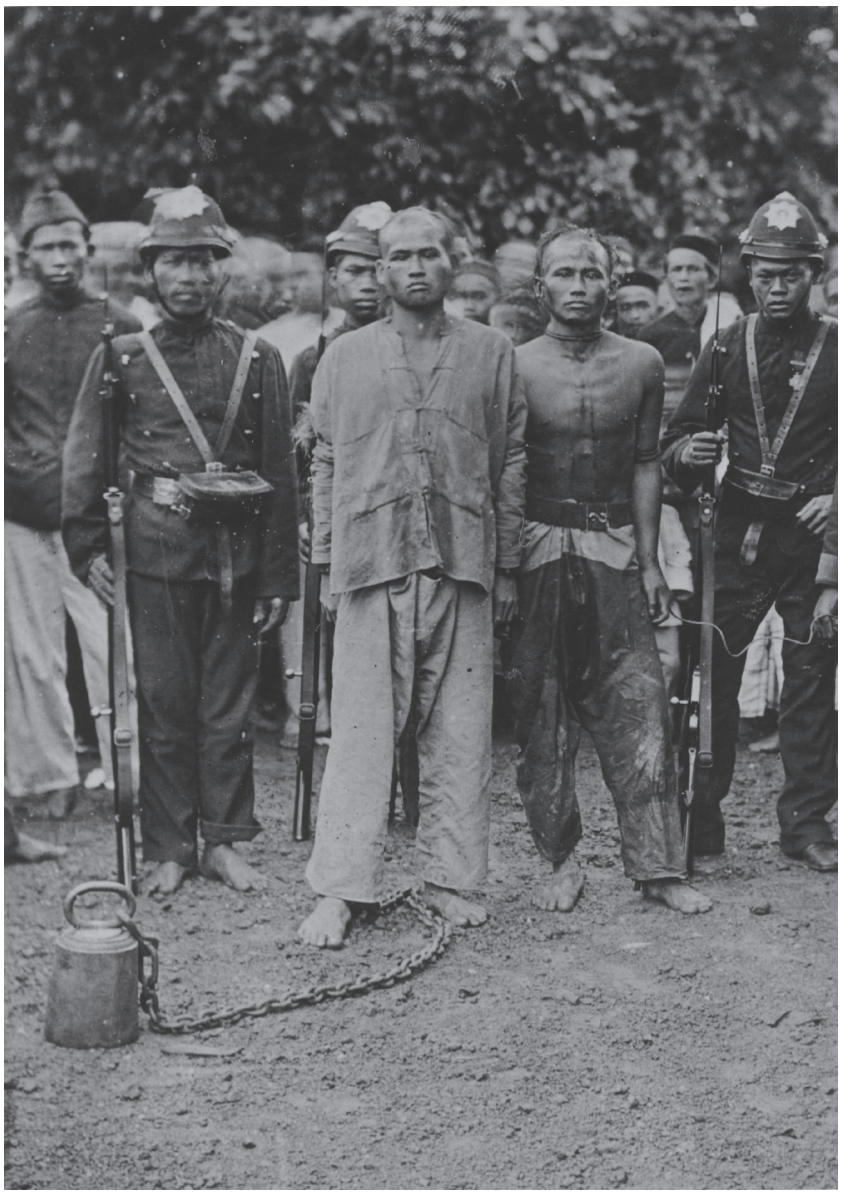

Figure 1.1. Two Chinese coolies accused of leading a coolie revolt in the Banka tin mines. The photo was taken in 1899 and has the caption: 'Captured Chinese gang leader Li Hong and one of his supporters surrounded by KNIL soldiers during the containment of a Chinese rebellion on Bangka, 1899.' Source: Netherlands Institute of Military History, obj. no. 2155-AC011539.

1 Colonialism and Racism

> [I]t is not possible to be part of such a [colonial] system without recognizing it as an unjustifiable tyranny.
>
> – George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937: 126)

The study of the colonial past

The prelude to this study is a prologue in which I describe my background and youth. I do this to focus attention on a little discussed observation: that the origin and identity of social scientists impact on their contributions to the disciplines practiced by them. The professional knowledge acquired through academic schooling supplements the world view that they had already developed beforehand. My basic argument is that the doxa underlying social science research, its theory and praxis, is coloured by middle-class or bourgeois notions. Awareness of these preconceived perceptions helps to place in perspective the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity that tends to be made all too lightly. This nuance is not without significance in a volume dealing with colonialism and racism.

My chronicle on colonialism and the racism from which it sprouted and which it fuelled begins with an essay devoted to political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville. The political theory that this scholar developed and put into practice in his career as a professional politician focused not on equality but on inequality. On how to comprehend the concept of imperialism, I refer to the definition by John A. Hobson in his classic discourse: the expansion of political dominance by Western nations over non-Western territories and their inhabitants (Hobson 1902). The ideological underpinnings of Hobson's case study lay in the Boer Wars fought by the British Empire in Southern Africa in the final two decades of the nineteenth century. These wars against a kindred people had a deep political impact in the Netherlands. In the public debate on the issue, social democrats claimed that the Netherlands was waging a similar imperialistic war in what was then known as the Dutch East Indies. Like many others, prominent Christian politician Abraham Kuyper indignantly dismissed this accusation. Expansion aimed at increasing national power, benefit and status was reserved for the great powers and was in his view not something that smaller countries were guilty of. Kuyper claimed that the Dutch presence in the Indonesian archipelago was founded on its moral calling to bring civilization, induced by Christian charity, wherever it was lacking.

In the Netherlands, the *parti pris* on imperialism as good as died out and did not resurface until the postcolonial era. The first step towards reviving the debate was a conference on Dutch colonial expansion in Indonesia in 1970, organized by the Netherlands Historical Society. This renewed attention inspired Maarten Kuitenbrouwer to write a well-researched thesis on the issue (Kuitenbrouwer 1985). In discussion with Kuitenbrouwer, Henk Wesseling (1988) contested the claim that Dutch colonial policy in the East Indies could be qualified as imperialism and argued that such a policy was not compatible with the national self-image. In addition to my refutation of Wesseling's standpoint in the fourth part of this volume, I disagree with both Kuitenbrouwer and Wesseling on their dating of modern imperialism. Both assume that the imperialist era did not begin earlier than 1880. Tocqueville's writings, not to mention records of Dutch colonial history from the end of the Middle Ages onwards, show clearly that this date is far too late and that the spreading tide of Western imperialism was in clear evidence already in the early nineteenth century. It was a development that was closely linked to the process of state formation that was unfolding in a relationship which intertwined the metropole with its overseas domain. I also disagree with the claim that imperialism came to an end at the beginning of the twentieth century. The slowly and haltingly emerging process of decolonization did not mark the end of the imperialist era. In the final part of this book, I argue that what passed as development aid in the second half of the twentieth century, as a partnership between generous donors and their grateful recipients, was essentially a continuation of imperialist policy in a new guise. On the receiving side the new relationship came to be branded as 'neocolonialism' (Nkrumah 1965). Nkrumah's indictment was shared by other leaders of countries which were then clubbed together as the Third World, including Indonesia's President Sukarno. These political statements followed up on the retrospective reflections of social scientists in the Global South on the regime of racism and capitalism to which their societies had been exposed. Aimé Césaire exemplified in his timely analysis how colonialism de-civilized both colonizer and colonized. Pointing out the hypocrisy underlying the Western concepts of civilization, progress and modernity, his *Discourse on Colonialism* (1955), addressed not only the past but also the mission of developmentalism that was in store.

I concur with Hobson's labelling of capitalism as one of the main driving forces of colonial expansion. The transition to a capitalist mode of production in the rapidly changing metropolitan societies and economies in this era demanded that they expand their economic range and power. They achieved this by importing raw materials – crops and minerals, in

particular – from their colonial domains and selling a growing share of their processed industrial commodities at markets in far-off lands accessed by them. I will discuss the factors contributing to this import and export of goods and services in opposing directions in later chapters. Strikingly little attention has been devoted to the link between imperialism and capitalism in conventional histories of Dutch and Belgian colonialism.

Labour as a sustained theme of my research

A major starting point in my academic career has been a focus on labour, which gave direction to my research agenda. In the mid-twentieth century, with the development decades already underway, an impassioned belief in universal progress was a momentous interlude in an interlocking frame of globalization. The question was not whether, but when and how the emancipation of labour, which had already been achieved in a small part of the world, would also take place in the Southern Hemisphere. There, under the influence of colonial domination, that progress in welfare had not occurred. My deep interest in the issue testified to my own identity as a product of upward mobility made possible by the transformation and expansion of the economic, political, social and cultural landscape in which I had grown up. I have already expressed my view that the fabric in which researchers originate is a highly significant yet much neglected factor in the path that leads them to the social sciences, their choice of themes to investigate and how they interpret their results. In my case, Wim Wertheim (Breman 2017) had a major impact on the development of my against-the-grain perceptions. The academic discussions in which I became embroiled, mainly with colonial historians and the multidisciplinary students of developmentalism, was founded on a difference of opinion on the impact of foreign domination, not only on colonial populations but on subordinated races and classes in general. The responses of many fellow historians to my studies of the most prominent and profitable of the Netherlands' colonial possessions led me to dispute the tenor of this historiography and the motives behind it.

In my first monograph on labour in the Dutch colonial past, I investigated a state-induced land reform project in a district of Java in the early twentieth century. The scheme essentially entailed disappropriation of arable land from the poor owners or tenants engaged to till these plots on a sharecropping basis (Breman 1983). The proletarianization of the low-ranking peasantry that accompanied this reform was achieved under Dutch authority and policy. This led me to focus my attention on the landless class that is largely absent

in most publications on what was and remained an agricultural economy. An increasing mass of dispossessed people was forced to depend on hiring out their labour power. Often condemned to a life in bondage, this class– embodied in the figure of the colonial coolie – would become a recurring subject in my further empirical research. Discussions on this theme, usually in historical journals, gave rise to my involvement in polemical debates on the interpretation of colonial policy and the extent to which the views I expressed contradicted the established wisdom. This means that the essays selected for inclusion in this volume must be understood in conjunction with the monographs of my empirical findings.

The order in which the contents of this volume are presented is based on the year of publication that sparked off subsequent discussion. The essays in the second part relate to the 'coolie scandal' which blew up in the Deli plantation belt at the beginning of the twentieth century. My description and analysis of the brutal work regime instituted in the capitalist enclave on Sumatra's East Coast (Breman 1987) attracted a great deal of attention. Chapter 3 in this volume, 'Dutch Colonialism and Its Racist Impact', is my response to the critique and comments raised at the time of publication. The tendency to dismiss these abuses as excesses whose scale should not be exaggerated not only denied the racism inherent to the labour system but also resonated what I have referred to as the colonial geist at the beginning of the twentieth century. I refuted the claim that the colonial government responded resolutely to the 'coolie scandal' by setting up a regional labour inspectorate. This agency was assumed to ensure the implementation of the legal provisions and would act promptly where and when 'irregularities' occurred. I countered this argument with circumstantial evidence that the plantation management and the government continued to conspire to maintain a cruel and inhuman labour regime set up after the abolition of slavery.

Castigating voices of dissent

I drew attention to the fact that my findings were in effect a repetition of accounts that appeared at the time in both the colonial and domestic press. They were often restricted to coincidentally reported incidents of manslaughter or horrific physical abuse of the workforce on a single plantation. But a pamphlet published in 1902 by lawyer Johannes van den Brand caused a furore for the ferocity with which he accused the booming agro-industrial enterprises in Deli of engaging in renewed slavery. Van den Brand was a

whistle-blower who had no doubts about his claims and, refusing to tone down his voice or shut up completely, persisted in his accusations in flagrant detail. His appeal was aimed at the Christian conscience of fellow believers and politicians of Christian-democratic persuasion. It was not a left-radical allegation, which in the conservative political setting would have been much easier to refute. Denounced and ostracized by the white community of expatriates in Medan, of which he was part and which he also needed to make a living, Van den Brand sought publicity in the homeland. Defamed for his documented allegations of dereliction of duty and fawning to the plantation lobby, Van den Brand brought down the hatred of the regional branch of the colonial civil service upon his head. Chapter 5 further discusses the crusade that he so doggedly pursued. While his words certainly fell on sympathetic ears, his testimony would disappear from public memory and continue to be ignored in the framing of colonial policy.

This 'advocate of shady deals' was not the only figure to play a pivotal role in the 'coolie scandal'. As an official charged with Chinese affairs, Bernard Hoetink had previously conducted an inquiry into 'excesses' of which Chinese labourers on plantations and in mines had been victims. Hoetink became the first director of the Labour Inspectorate, which only covered Sumatra's East Coast, but he resigned two years after being appointed. Again, it was Johannes van den Brand who publicly announced the real reason for Hoetink's early resignation, together with his two deputy inspectors: opposition and ill will from the colonial official in charge of the region and his staff. Governor-General Van Heutsz urged Minister of Colonies A.W.F. Idenburg to stop making use of Hoetink's services and not to follow his advice to detach the Labour Inspectorate from the bureaucratic apparatus in the residency. His proposal to make the Inspectorate directly accountable to the Department of Justice in the colonial headquarters came to nothing. Hoetink made it known among his circle of colleagues in The Hague that his early retirement was due to the resistance he had encountered, which left him with no choice but to resign.

Lastly, Johannes Rhemrev, a public prosecutor of Indo-European stock, was charged with looking into the presumed incorrectness of the slanderous allegations and accusations presented so insistently by Van den Brand. This was only after his white colleagues at the Department of Justice had concocted a wide variety of excuses not to take on the job. When Rhemrev produced his revealing report in 1903, it made him less than popular with his superiors. His atrocious findings provided solid evidence for the whistle-blower's claims. What drove him to take such a frank and fair position? Did his meticulous work conceal a veiled intention to catch the authorities

looking in the other direction and distorting the truth, while being actively involved in the brutal repression of labour? Or was his report the product of a legal professional who brought together the data together he needed to come to a professional opinion, to the best of his ability? Unlike Van den Brand, as colonial officials, Hoetink and Rhemrev could not speak freely and had to keep silent. In response to a request from Minister Idenburg to advise him on whether to reward Rhemrev with a royal distinction, Governor-General Van Heutsz did not hesitate to reject the already drafted proposal. The tenor of the service records he appended to his decision was that there was less to criticize about the public prosecutor's competence than about his personality. The scathing summary of these assessments reads as follows:

> In my opinion, the crux of the matter is that, although public prosecutor Rhemrev is considered to be extremely competent, he is deemed undesirable for other reasons; while no one dare express these reasons out loud; they are in my view as follows: he is a small and unsightly Indo, married to a dressed up Dutch kitchen maid and, according to many, not a man of integrity, though there is no evidence to support the latter allegation. It is thus unfortunate that he was sent to Deli, despite him being very suitable to perform the assignment which he was given, and that he consequently caught the public eye and became well known, also in the Netherlands. (Breman 1992: 45-46)

The man indirectly responsible for Rhemrev's fall from grace, Johannes van den Brand, had at least the good fortune and courage to engage in battle against colonial authority in the full gaze of political notoriety. His name may have been defamed in public, but was at least not besmirched behind closed doors. The treatment of coolie labour revealed a deeply rooted racism which permeated the late-colonial climate. This observation certainly applied not only to colonial Indonesia. This became clear to me when I learned of the rubber regime which King Leopold II of Belgium had imposed upon the people of the Congo Free State. As discussed in the third part of this volume, it took far longer in Belgium than in the Netherlands to be able to express a critical opinion on the terror of racism without being immediately reviled by the stakeholders and proponents of colonial rule.

The essays in the second and third part of this volume were published towards the end of the last century or shortly afterwards. They were followed by a new study on the forced supply of commercial crops grown on Java in the early colonial period and its continuation in the notorious cultivation

system (Breman 2015). The Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (Dutch East India Company, VOC) imposed this regime on the peasantry in the hinterland of Batavia, which had fallen under the company's control, as a form of taxation. It is clear from eighteenth-century sources that perception of skin colour led at an early stage to the identification of racial distinctions based on the notion that communities with a different ethnicity to that in the homeland were classified as inferior. This denigration was based on the persistent refusal of Javanese peasantry to cultivate crops without being paid a reasonable wage for the commodities they were expected to deliver. The reproach that the subordinated people were work-shy led the VOC to lay claim to their labour power at little or no cost and to sell the resulting produce at extremely lucrative prices on the expanding world market.

The appropriation of labour and produce took on even greater proportions after the bankruptcy of the VOC at the end of the eighteenth century. The build-up of the early colonial state in the East Indies under Herman Willem Daendels consolidated the regime of exploitation and repression that was extended to increasingly larger parts of the Indonesian archipelago later in the nineteenth century. The colonial enterprise had grown from a monopolistic corporation to a profitable étatist project intended, initially under monarchical command, to contribute to financing the multinational state formation which merged the homeland with the acquired colonial realm. Tocqueville forefronted this objective with fervent endeavour throughout his political career.

The pretence of a multinational state

The fourth part of this volume starts with the 'othering' of the Indonesian peoples on the basis of their skin colour. Their unsuitability for self-governance was an axiom that remained intact long after the late-colonial era. The colour bar that dominated daily life was embedded and upheld in administrative practice – also when, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the government held out the prospect of a better life for the dominated population. The virtual failure to fulfil this promise ran parallel to the emergence of the nationalist movement, which was allowed no scope at all to develop. In both governance and policy, the imperialist claim to sovereignty over foreign territory was maintained. The transformation of the colony into an overseas territory of the metropole was an expression of the intention to continue to hold sway over acquired possessions. This objective was disguised behind the repeated pledge to educate the population to

self-rule. The stubborn adherence to the right to dominate over the colony clearly shows that the Netherlands had no desire to make concessions to the growing demand for independence.

The strong desire to no longer be subjugated to foreign control but to determine their own future ultimately triumphed. It was a struggle that had to be fought through many years of war. Immediately after the liberation from Japanese occupation during World War II, the Netherlands refused to accept the declaration of independence by the nationalist leadership on 17 August 1945. Backed up by the arrival of large troop contingents, the Dutch army and administration was able to take control of the ports and cities throughout the archipelago and also to occupy regions which had become enclaves of corporate capitalism under expatriate management, mainly plantations and mines. However, the military operations failed to take control of the countryside and lost the guerrilla war fought by the leadership of the nationalist movement with massive support of the population. In his writings, Indonesia's famed novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer has eminently documented this nationwide insurgence and the civic turmoil to which it gave rise. The treaty which ended the last colonial war in 1949 confirmed Indonesia's independence but at a very high price. The Dutch delegation insisted on extensive financial compensation for the defeat it had suffered.

The final part of this volume begins with a retrospective look at the decline of the colonial project and its impact on Indonesia's politics and economy. Public opinion in the Netherlands has also in the postcolonial era been led to believe that the Dutch were excellent colonial taskmasters and can look back on this past with self-satisfaction. In this representation, the colonial government devoted itself to civilizing the Indonesian population. How did that materialize? The customary criterion is the extent to which these overseas territories were successfully coached to follow in the pathway their tutors had passed through themselves. In the perception that dominated at the time and is still widespread, modernization was equated with progressive development towards Westernization. This view of the transformation process had its origins in the Enlightenment thinking of the eighteenth century and bore witness to an ethnocentric prejudice. The colonial state failed to prepare the people of Indonesia – and those of the Belgian Congo – for independence. Not out of ignorance, but with the conscious intention of maintaining the colony in a state of subjugation. The oppressed nation only gained its independence after many years of struggle. In the aftermath of decolonization, the former colony continued to suffer from what it had previously been denied: knowledge of its own past and both participation in and prospects for a future of its own.

I have already argued that decolonization did not mark the end of the policy of imperialism. After the initial shock of their unintended and lamented departure, the former rulers continued as before in maintaining their hegemonic role in the accelerating process of globalization, unaffected by the loss of their overseas possessions and with little willingness to give much thought to their shared past. In the middle of the twentieth century, the doctrine of social inequality practiced within and beyond state borders appeared to have been abandoned for good. That, at least, was the intention of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights announced by the United Nations. The charter formulated the worldwide right to equality. The vexed resistance to the decolonization process from beginning to end raises doubts about a genuine commitment to freedom and equality in relations between states and peoples. This lack of commitment is clear from the last colonial war that the Netherlands fought in the Indonesian archipelago and Belgium a few years later in Central Africa.

The remainder of my argument examines how the colonial past continues to resound in the postcolonial present. Despite appearances to the contrary, the wave of nation-building around the middle of the twentieth century cannot be seen as a dramatic turning point in the world order. Belated acknowledgement that the colonial epoch had ended was accompanied by resentment about the loss of a lucrative custody combined with sadness for the premature termination of what, through the lens of racially tinted delusion, was seen as a civilizing mission. The surrender of territorial domination over other countries and peoples was enforced with much violence and disputed to the very end. While old-style imperialism entailed the subjugation of countries and their people, redemption from foreign control did not signify a release from political and economic oppression. Although upscaled to independent national states, they continued to be subordinate to the biddings of their former rulers. The latter used their dominance in the newly emerged global system of front runners versus stragglers to uphold and further expand their lead over the majority of humanity.

My academic mentor Wim Wertheim was an early advocate of providing aid and support to less-developed countries, but warned against it degenerating into neocolonialism. Instead of imposing assistance from above, he argued in favour of a bottom-up approach that gave a prominent role to trade unions and cooperatives to ensure that participation and democratic leadership would be upheld at the lowest levels of the social system (Wertheim 1950: 160-74). His appeal fell on deaf ears. As host to the Bandung Conference of 'non-aligned countries' in Asia and Africa in 1955, Indonesia's President Sukarno also berated the neocolonialism that in his

eyes lurked behind the promise of massive aid programmes pledged by the former rulers.

Development became the slogan of the transnational policies pursued in the second half of the twentieth century. Under this motto, the developed countries in what was known as the First World – under the leadership of the countries around the North Atlantic Ocean, promoted capitalism as the harbinger of progress and escape from backwardness. The question why, how and when these societies had fallen behind was subordinate to the goal of achieving this great leap forwards. The less-developed countries were mainly former colonies that had gained their independence sooner (South America) or later (Asia and Africa). The legacy of this past was not examined in any detail, but the stamp of inferiority that had formerly been imposed upon those from other races now made way for a focus on their neediness. The difficult process of civilization was retooled to development and was no longer cast in the hierarchical mould of higher and lower, but was envisaged in a setting of partnership. The like-minded partners would work closely together to pursue their common goal of eradicating underdevelopment, clarified as the combination of poverty, dependency and stagnation. To follow the same course that the advanced economies had taken earlier, the nations lagging behind – lumped together in the concept of an impoverished Third World – could make use of development aid. That assistance predominantly comprised capital made available bilaterally or multilaterally and was provided as long as the recipients fulfilled the conditions imposed on them by donors from the First World. This entailed a willingness to subject themselves to the capitalist dictates of the 'free West', to resist the lure of the Second World and its option of a different but better future. Three-quarters of a century later, global development is no longer preached as a common goal. The mission of a shared trust in the common good has been replaced by an emphatic insistence on self-reliance, in which each country, community and individual is expected to act according to the sacrosanct tenets of neoliberal ideology. Heeding that requirement means that the ambition to relieve the plight of less privileged segments of humanity has become an illusion.

The eclipse of universalized betterment

Colonial expansion cannot be seen separately from the global context in which it unfolded in multinational state formation. Any analysis in hindsight of our domination over overseas territories must take account

of the changing framework in the metropoles. While the Netherlands was establishing its authority in far-off continents, a transition was taking place at home from an agrarian-artisanal economy and society to an industrial-urban one organized by capitalist fervour. That major reform contributed to, but also resulted from, new opportunities and profits from the colonial undertaking. The subjugation of foreign territories and their inhabitants occurred at a time when the lower classes in the metropoles were still living in dire poverty and lacking political leverage. The desire for better terms of employment and social security – referred to as the social question – encouraged the labouring poor to unite and act together. That marked the birth of the social struggle, which called for solidarity as a means and an end in the fight for a better and dignified way of life. The process of emancipation took shape in a steady trend towards economic, political and social equality. The capitalist mode of production was also introduced in countries that fell under colonial rule, but without the possibility of addressing, let alone solving, the 'social question'.

In my analysis of the link between colonialism and racism, my attention has focused mainly on the way in which colonial labour continued to be confined in unfreedom and subordination. Yet in Europe, too, the road to equality was long and slow. The disdain with which Alexis de Tocqueville looked down from his aristocratic perspective on the plebs at the base of society received a strong boost in the second half of the nineteenth century in social Darwinism. In this ideology, race emerged as a concept that applied not only to other nations and ethnic groups but also to despised and 'defective' segments of the home population, a stigmatization that smacked of domestic colonialism. It was a racialized ideology that persisted until the early decades of the twentieth century. Speaking of his own origins in the wealthy classes, George Orwell expressed this prejudice towards the lower classes in the following words:

> To me in my boyhood, to nearly all children of families like mine, 'common' people seemed almost sub-human. They had coarse faces, hideous accents and gross manners, they hated everyone who was not like themselves, and if they got half a chance they would insult you in brutal ways. That was our view of them, and though it was false it was understandable. For one must remember that before the war there was much more *overt* class hatred in England than there is now. (Orwell 1937: 158)

If I recall the way in which my parents were treated in their childhood and youth, the situation was little different in the Netherlands. I have already

noted that the rural and urban lower classes had no direct involvement in the Dutch East Indies. Although young males from these classes were recruited as mercenaries in the colonial army, this white core group was housed in barracks together with troops largely recruited in the Indies at the margins of colonial society. From the last decades of the nineteenth century onwards, the racial dividing lines in the Indies deepened. As before, the colonial project required the local presence of the higher and lower middle classes from the metropole and it was self-evident that these expatriates occupied the top positions. What intrigues me is that the newcomers from the better-off classes were aware of the emancipation of the proletariat at home. Besides improving their working lives, the social struggle fought by the labouring poor also meant that their calls for equality were heard, albeit haltingly. Despite this gradual shift in metropolitan power relations, there was no change in the structure of colonial society, based on extreme inequality. In the Netherlands, civil society slowly moved towards recognition of the equality of all inhabitants, professed political awareness, consolidated this in enfranchisement and kept pace with this advancement. But in the Indies the gap between high and low became greater than it had ever been in the Netherlands. This contrast revealed the limits to egalitarian thinking and was symbolized by the image of the 'colonial boss' epitomized in the drawings included in this volume. They are portraits of white managers with their posture of prominence and unquestionable authority over their subjects in the plantation belt of Deli, even though they are portrayed with undisguised mockery by their illustrator, Eberhart Freiherr von Wechmar (1927).

The management of the colonial enterprise was entrusted to European newcomers who fitted seamlessly into the highest echelon of the complex social hierarchy of superiority versus inferiority. The few dissenters among them who refused to accept this graded divergence were silenced. It has always struck me how the servant class that declined and then disappeared entirely in the metropole was embraced as an indispensable component of the 'colonial' way of life. The simple and cheap use of menials was accompanied by the abandonment of standards, morals and customs that applied to the interaction between members of the race in overall command. This apartheid was expressed in gradations of incompatibility that will be highlighted and further amplified in Chapter 9. On this spectrum of separation, assimilation was the mildest form, which implied the possibility of white and brown merging in a melting pot of races. It was a prospect that had few supporters and found no place in official policy. Coded segregation was endorsed by a white community that adhered doggedly to its acquired privileges and showed no willingness to make generous concessions to

the desire for access to and participation of the autochthonous masses in mainstream society other than in rank subalternity. Between these polar extremes, the proponents of an intermediary course advocated association. From this perspective, the Indonesian was not less civilized but differently encultured, equipped with an identity that inhibited the advance of progress and welfare in commonality. The goal of the colonial mission was to achieve a synthesis that kept the existing social institutions intact – as conceived and imposed by the colonial government – to ensure a smooth path to development along the route that had been successfully traced by the white power mongers.

The treatment of the Indonesian population as subjects without civil rights was accompanied by a regime of vigilance designed to identify any display of resistance, nip it in the bud and, in the unfortunate event that it did erupt into open revolt, impose strict punishment. That led to the emergence of a surveillance state, embodied by the Political Intelligence Service, set up in 1916. With reference to Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *House of Glass* (1992), Benedict Anderson depicted the late-colonial state as a dirigiste system in which, in the final decade of colonial rule, Jeremy Bentham's panopticon became reality (Anderson 2006: 184-85). The structure of the colonial order was unassailably fixed and the set course towards self-rule in the distant future could not be deviated from in word or deed. Only later would it become clear that the perspective on and control over the colonized society in this final phase of domination was much more fragile than the subjugating authority took for granted. In 1929, in a radical break with the authorized viewpoint, historian Jan Romein published his essay 'Het ontwaken van Azië' ('The awakening of Asia') in which he announced a radical change in the world order. It was a dialectical argument that foresaw a reversal of the prevailing perspective on the self-evident nature of sustained colonial rule. The Dutch community in the colony was hardly aware of this prophecy of imminent independence. Despite becoming gradually more radical in his views, Wim Wertheim only became acquainted with what his later colleague and political companion had written fifteen years earlier while in detention in Japanese camps during World War II (Wertheim 1980-81: 43). Romein would later expand on the perspective that he had developed in his theory of a Common Human Pattern, of which in his view modernizing Europe was the exception rather than the ultimate expression. His fundamental difference of opinion broke with the standard phase theory in which Western forerunners led the way and non-Western latecomers joined slowly and reluctantly in a universal march to social progress (Romein 1954).

Emancipation in default

Orthodox Christian dogma and a fervent capitalist ethos set the tone for late-colonial politics and responded with brute force against the growing desire for national freedom of the Indonesian people. Chapter 10 describes and analyses the so-called Ethical Policy, exposing it as a façade behind which a hard-headed evangelistic and capitalist course was concealed. How did Dutch social democracy respond to the fierce exploitation and oppression of the working classes in the domesticated territories beyond its own borders? Freedom and equality had been declared universal in the foundational manifesto of the Social Democratic Workers' Party (Sociaal-Democratische Arbeiderspartij, SDAP). However, its leadership had over time tampered with and compromised on the articles declaring freedom, equality and solidarity as universal values. Recognition of the right to national independence was not free from racist notions, expressed by the practical need for ongoing guardianship. The party's congress on colonialism in Utrecht in 1930 may have called for an end to domination over other peoples, but only in the long term and after their thorough preparation. An important constraint in the halting march to a common future was that the transfer of sovereignty would result in a loss of 10 per cent of working-class jobs at home. The same hesitancy and ambivalence afflicted the reborn Labour Party (Partij van de Arbeid, PvdA) after World War II, which coincided with the Indonesian struggle for freedom. The dilemma of choosing between continued colonial rule and recognition of independence degenerated into nationalistic self-interest and complete renunciation of social-democratic ideology beyond national borders. The lesson drawn from this assessment of political events and choices made is that the priority given to the settlement of the social question led to the at least provisional emancipation of the working classes in the Netherlands. The outcome of this process, the welfare state, was to a large extent paid for from the high gains obtained through the exploitation and subjugation in captivity of the country's most important overseas territory. This conclusion confirms Tocqueville's statement that colonialism should be seen in the context of state making in the homeland.

The momentum of globalization did not stop with decolonization. What followed in the second half of the twentieth century was a multinational policy envisaged to end the backwardness of the decolonized countries. The pledge of large-scale aid during the three 'development decades' was broadcast as donor generosity from the West to facilitate economic growth. Following the prescribed path would enable the Third World to break out of stagnation and catch up with the forerunners of capitalist prosperity and

welfarism. The gospel of developmentalism evaporated in the 1970s and 1980s. In the decades that followed, lip service continued to be paid this holy grail of economic progress worldwide, but this façade of multilateral charity has now also faded away. The acceptance of the neoliberal doctrine in the late twentieth century has resulted in unbridled and financialized capitalism, the erosion of acquired labour rights, contraction of the public economy and shrinking or dismantling of the welfare state where it had emerged. These are issues on which I have elaborated in other publications.

Impact of the colonial legacy

The final chapter of this volume briefly discusses the impact of the colonial past on Indonesia's political and social order in the aftermath of independence, and then examines the postcolonial memory of '*ons Indië*' ('our Indies') in the country of the former ruler. In the Netherlands, such a retrospective reveals divergent perspectives. On the one hand, there is a noticeable tendency to devote no attention to the country's long-lasting presence in far-off lands and to erase from the national slate of glory the wealth extracted from these lands and their peoples for several centuries. This intentional disregard, even denial, of the expansion overseas, could be considered the Dutch variant of a *tempo doeloe* (good old days) cult. It portrays the national past as a cosy time when everyone got on well together, intimately restricted to those of our own blood and soil, with no alien elements in our midst. The arrival of the 'outsiders' from the former colonies broke through what was seen with hindsight and looked back on with nostalgia as a closed circle of uniqueness, proximity and familiarity. At the opposite end of the spectrum to this concoction of parochial sentiments is the urge to keep the memory of an illustrious past alive and to appeal to the national pride and prestige associated with it. The central elements of this nostalgic image of colonialism are a patriotic endeavouring spirit, the desire and power to rule over peoples in far-off regions and to radiate the gloss of that now bygone exercise of power. As late as 2006, a prime minister of orthodox Christian persuasion referred with pride and respect to the VOC mentality as proof of proper and admirable Dutch resolve.

In light of the appreciation this legacy enjoys, it would be incorrect to declare the racist nature of imperialism and the concomitant social Darwinist ideas, which also had their roots in the nineteenth century, as obsolete ideologies. These opinions bear witness to a mindset that has its origins in the denial of human dignity of and affinity with other than the white-skinned

races. That denial can disturbingly enough not be considered a relic of past times. According to Raben, the distance between metropolis and colony tend to uphold the myths regarding the necessity of ruling over uncivilized and less-developed peoples (2019: 223). The closure of that gap indomitably exposed the racism that was inherent in colonial rule. Former inhabitants of the colonial kingdom who settled in the Netherlands with their offspring speak not only of the racism with which they were disciplined, but also of the routine or institutional racism they encountered in their process of social integration in the redefined statist canvass. While early proponents of this narrative found few sympathetic ears outside their own ethnic circles, these voices are heard more loudly in the second and third generations of the newcomers. That rising animosity is the consequence of interaction with an emerging ethnic-populistic 'own people first' mentality. The doctrine of inequality that was pursued beyond our borders has had a modern-day impact on the domestic front with a political tint that has degenerated into a disposition based on staying 'free of foreign stains'.

My reflections on racism in its colonial context have their origins in the research that I have conducted in past decades on the impact of the Dutch regime in what was then 'our Indies'. The data on which that analysis is based has an emphatically socio-economic stamp. My comments remain limited to the terrain that I have covered in the monographs referred to above. The lesson that can be learned is essentially that the conceptualization of this past should extend beyond taking stock of the Netherlands' overseas expansion. While interdependence in a global system has moved forward at ever greater speed, the need for knowledge on the structure and transformation of non-Western societies seems to have declined. Will the new trend of rising economic, political, social and ethnic inequality lead to a new round of imperialism? In my perception that eventuality concerns variants of hegemonic exercise of power that are not expressed in territorial occupation, but take shape in an interaction between leaders and stragglers, dominance and dependency, super- and subordination. This trend towards simultaneous polarization is manifested in the exclusion of peoples or communities, both outside and within the framework of the national state. Alongside my earlier discourse on the topicality of the *social question* in the twenty-first century, made manifest in contemporary pauperism (Breman 2016 and 2023). I have in this collection of essays brought together my critical notes on the *colonial question*. Both issues are founded on closely related ideologies of social exclusion. These ideologies began to take shape in Europe in the late eighteenth century, and came to maturity in the nineteenth century. They found fertile ground in the capitalist credo

of the free market. This doctrine, which denies the existence of a public domain and the associated mechanism of inclusion to shared connectivity and solidarity, has once again taken hold throughout the world. It calls for a critical approach which, in the interests of social justice for humanity as a whole, offers resistance against this political-economic theory and practice of progressive inequality and exclusion.

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2 Alexis de Tocqueville on Class and Race

> Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement.
> – John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* ([1859] 1897: 6)

Democracy as self-reliance

The scion of an old noble family in Normandy, Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) grew up in an aristocratic milieu in the early nineteenth century. The mores and customs of his breeding were to determine his character for life. Unlike his close relatives, as a graduate student he began to distance himself from the wave of restoration that swept across post-revolutionary France and throughout Europe. For Tocqueville, a return to the *ancien régime* with an absolute monarch at the top was out of the question. Emancipatory ideas that were in vogue at the time led him to believe that a process of democratization was in the offing. As he completed his law studies, the question of how these ideas would work out in practice inspired him to travel to America. After being appointed a junior magistrate, he received official permission to study the penal system in the United States. The commission he received enabled Tocqueville to distance himself from the reign of Louis Philippe I, who had been sworn in as Citizen King of France in 1830. Together with his lifelong friend and companion Gustave Beaumont, he toured a sparsely populated country where colonists had thrown off the yoke of domination and set up a society based on democratic principles.

What the two travellers observed was a citizenry of Anglo-Saxon origins spread out across the countryside or in rural towns. These citizens, still mostly engaged in independent farming, trade and services, cooperated closely together to run the small-scale associations in the communities to which they belonged. Recording their observations in his book *De la démocratie en Amérique* (1835), Tocqueville found his belief confirmed that a democratic future was an ideal worth striving for. He warned, however, that the pathway to achieving this ideal was not self-evident. If democratization moved ahead too rapidly, it ran the risk that equality would go too far, leaving the citizenry fragmented, oppressed and in individualized apathy, succumbed to an all-powerful state machinery.

Barely a year after his return from America, Tocqueville embarked on a new journey, this time to England where he believed that a social revolution

was imminent. Here, the Reform Act in 1832 had extended the franchise to the petty bourgeoisie, the owners of means of production including farmers, artisans and shopkeepers. This wider political participation contributed to the introduction of an amendment to the Poor Law in 1834. During his short stay in the country, Tocqueville familiarized himself with the intent and scope of this imminent reform and so became acquainted with what was to develop into an important social question – How to provide care for the poor? – which was estimated to be a sixth of the population. The amendment essentially meant that destitute people who were capable of working would henceforth no longer receive relief if they became unemployed in their place of residence. That allowance dated back to the late Middle Ages, when the non-poor in local communities were obliged to contribute to the upkeep of households that were temporarily or permanently unable to fend for themselves. The amendment was considered necessary as this relief was seen to make the labouring poor work-shy and an unfair burden on the better-off. The shift from an agrarian-rural to an industrial-urban society which accelerated around the middle of the nineteenth century, meant the abolition of this customary support. The proletarianized class would have to seek its own solace for periodic or chronic incapacity to meet their basic needs.

The amendment to the Poor Law drove a growing army of land poor and landless people who could not find regular employment in agriculture and the countryside at large to the towns and cities. There, expansion of industry, construction and transport pushed demand for labour from the immediate and further hinterland to increasingly higher levels. In the report on his findings, *Mémoire sur le paupérisme*, published in 1835, Tocqueville declared himself an unconditional proponent of abolishing the right to public relief for the 'undeserving poor', i.e. all those of sound body and mind but bereft of the means of subsistence. He presented a number of arguments to back up this view: state relief would have the unfortunate tendency to strengthen bureaucratic centralization, destroy the bond of humanity between giver and receiver, and arouse feelings of inferiority and resentment among the propertyless. Tocqueville came to this conclusion after attending a meeting of a local council in the country's rural south chaired by Lord Radnor, his host and peer. Radnor was owner of the local manorial estate and, as an unpaid justice of the peace, settled disputes between recipients and providers of traditional poor relief in the locality. In Tocqueville's view, the remedy for poverty was not public support but private charity, though he had to admit that the latter was both inadequate and unpredictable. An aristocracy based on land ownership had been replaced by a new elite founded on

monetary wealth that was filled with a greed he abhorred. Although the pace of urbanization and industrialization had severely widened the gap between rich and poor, he believed that the chances of a social revolution around the corner were slight.

Second thoughts on the social question

Tocqueville admitted that a second visit to England was required to corroborate his initial assessment. In 1835, he travelled first to the industrial north and then on to Ireland. He was now more aware than before of the huge gap between the extremes of the class spectrum. Yet, aristocrat as he was, he did not actually descend into the world of poverty and need. He sought the company of his peers and observed the lot of the working classes from a distance. He asked others with intimate knowledge of the situation and recorded what they told him in detail. But the descriptions of what he saw and heard during the few days he spent in Manchester impressed him deeply:

> [Y]ou will see the huge palaces of industry. You will hear the noise of furnaces, the whistle of steam. These vast structures keep air and light out In Threat of Redundancy of the human habitation which they dominate; they envelop them in perpetual fog; here is the slave, there is the master; there the wealth of some, here the poverty of most; there the organized efforts of thousands produce, to the profit of one man, what society has not learnt to give. Here the weakness of the individual seems more feeble and helpless even than in the middle of a wilderness; here the effects, there the causes.... From this foul drain the greatest stream of human industry flows out to fertilise the whole world. From this filthy sewer pure gold flows. Here humanity attains its most complete development and its most brutish; here civilization works its miracles, and civilized man is turned back almost into a savage. (Breman 2016: 242-43)

His evocative passages bear a striking resemblance to the account that Friedrich Engels wrote ten years later on the exploitation and repression of mill workers in the textile industry. Tocqueville was much more at ease with the industrialism found in Birmingham, the next city he visited, where small-scale production in craft workshops appeared to be surviving. The relationship between master and servant had not yet become one of despicable inequality and, in his view, still held out the possibility of social

mobility through training and experience. This was the direction in which Tocqueville sought the answer to the social question.

He continued his journey with a tour through Ireland, where a large proportion of the workforce in Manchester came from, fleeing the deprivation crippling their agrarian homeland. On arrival in Dublin, he visited a poor house that provided some 1,800 to 2,000 paupers daily with bed and board and described their dire circumstances with compassion. No less astute and harrowing were the notes jotted in his diary on the immense misery he saw from his coach as he toured the Irish countryside. He described it as the consequence of the country's colonial rule in the hands of a landed elite of Protestant denomination oppressing the Catholic peasantry. The great Irish famine of 1845-50 was still ten years away but his informants told him that the majority of the people lived on potatoes, and many often did not even have that to fall back on. Was voluntary charity the solution? Generosity for one's more unfortunate fellow humans had after all been his proffered alternative for public relief. Tocqueville left no doubt that the moral bond between poor and rich had been lost. The English estate owners were indifferent to the misery that surrounded them. The inescapable contrast between an impoverished peasant existence and the luxury of the landed estates conflicted with an interpretation Tocqueville would continue to advocate, that the opulence of the few and the destitution of the many should be seen as a consequence of industrialism. His works fail completely to address the early appearance of capitalism in the rural economy and the sea change it led to in relations between the agrarian classes.

Tocqueville's second journey gave him considerable pause for thought. He pointed out, for example, that poverty has a relative and relational significance. Deprivation must be understood in the context within which it occurs and in conjunction with the accumulation of wealth. As before, he minutely recorded his observations, but did not this time publish what he had learned. Perhaps he was already preoccupied with another agenda on his return to France. When he completed a draft manuscript in 1837, he decided to put it to one side for the moment, pressed by other priorities. That may be true, but it is more likely that what he had seen caused him to doubt the solution for destitution he had envisaged. The main thread of this sequel to his first *Mémoire*, not published until 1989, was to spread property more widely and redistribute land aggregated in the hands of a privileged class. Together with education and healthcare, acquiring means of production was a common denominator in the measures Tocqueville proposed – participation in management, workers' cooperatives, profit-sharing, savings schemes, etc. – to combat the pauperism of the proletariat in

the urbanizing economy. But he was well aware that his proposals would not meet with a warm welcome from the captains of industry. He did nothing to conceal his contempt for their desire to accumulate more and more wealth. This disdain, however, did not weaken his belief that owning property was an inviolable right, no matter how it was appropriated. He rejected any form of compulsion to make concessions to this sacrosanct principle. For Tocqueville, restoring the lost harmony between the social classes was the key to establishing a democratic society. In effect, he did not want to acquiesce in the sociological insights he demonstrated while reflecting on his visit to industrial England and agrarian Ireland. In the transition to large-scale industrialism, the classes at the upper and lower ends of society had become more distanced from each other. The polarity he had witnessed in the destitute countryside of Ireland and the cities of England had its origins in unfettered capitalism. This imagery troubled him but he did not want to see it as a vista for the future. He believed that, in America, he had found the ideal setting that underpinned his political engagement and refused to admit that the findings of his second journey to Britain had deprived him of the hopeful prospect of imminent human freedom and equality that he was restlessly seeking.

The imperative necessity of colonialism

Back in France, Tocqueville remained true to his role as political philosopher and publicist, a dedication that earned him membership of the Académie Française in 1837 and recognition as a *maître-savant*. That fame did not stop him, however, from choosing a different path in his career and entering active politics. In 1839, the voters in his native district – mainly of peasant stock, though restricted to those who owned property and worked at their own cost and risk – sent him to the national parliament. In his role as representative of the people, he forcefully pushed for acquiring overseas territories. In the general assembly, he became an ardent proponent of and expert on the colonial question. As superior civilizations, the great European powers had a duty to subject less developed peoples elsewhere in the world to their domination. His argument was driven by unadulterated chauvinism. Colonialism was necessary for the sake of the greater honour and glory of the homeland. What drove him was not the desire for material gain but fear of the fragility of state formation at home. The urgent need to build up an integrated nation state was hampered by the growing economic and social divide between the property-owning and dispossessed classes, a

trend undermining political stability. Arousing and consolidating nationalist sentiments was above all the motive for his insistence on annexing overseas territories. In addition, territorial expansion acted as a safety valve, offering escape to colonists who left their homeland in search of a better life. In the emerging heyday of imperialism, occupying the coastal region of Algeria in 1830 had been the first choice of French domination overseas. In the decade that followed, the appropriated territory experienced an influx of colonists, many from other Mediterranean countries. Children born to these immigrants of diverse ethnic backgrounds acquired French nationality. France had come to stay and Algeria was from the very beginning established as a settlement colony. The newcomers, known as *pieds-noirs*, were part of an influx of small peasants, higher and lower civil servants, craftsmen, shopkeepers, liberal professionals and major landowners. They would eventually grow to account for a tenth of the population and, as a dominant class, took possession of most of the cultivable land and other immoveable commodities. Their settlement in the country boiled down to large-scale theft of property, of which the indigenous population was to be deprived for good.

Tocqueville did not hesitate to voice his approval of the excessive violence that accompanied colonial conquest, saying as much in the report on his first visit to Algeria as a member of parliament in 1841. His expression of support displayed an undiluted racist tone. In two parliamentary reports submitted after this second journey to Algeria in 1847, he advocated splitting up the country into two circuits, the lower subjugated to the upper. The installation of apartheid was framed in a body of legislation, supplemented by an unwritten but closely monitored code of instructions and taboos regulating day-to-day interaction between the races. The guerrilla war that accompanied the occupation of the hinterland was quashed with military terror. The completion of pacification led Tocqueville to call upon the military command to practice its domination to the extent possible with human moderation.

The 1848 revolution

Tocqueville felt impelled to focus in his political career on the escalating class conflict in France. The social question had become increasingly urgent with the expulsion of labour from agriculture and the rural economy. *Dépôts de mendicité* for impoverished country folk had already been opened in the late feudal era. They were meant to set these footloose drifters to work in

exchange for bed and board. As elsewhere in Europe, France had introduced laws against vagrancy, poaching and other offences that confirmed the image of the volatile proletariat as *la classe dangereuse*. Such attempts to restrain the immoral behaviour and wanderlust attributed to these paupers and thus put a stop to vagabondism, met with little success. They formed bands that came and went with the seasons and it proved impossible to place them under surveillance and transform their roaming existence into a sedentary one. How could this modern nomadism be brought under control? In his aristocratic perception, they were a motley mob made up of the poor, needy and homeless, work-shy, rebellious and insensitive to discipline in their precarious life on the margins of society.

Tocqueville's classification of the underclasses as an amorphous and flighty mass prevented him from noticing that in Paris and other large cities, a self-skilled contingent of factory labour had settled close to their work sites. In their resistance to exploitation and repression, this vanguard of the emerging large-scale mode of industrial production joined forces to collectively demand improvements in their living and working conditions from both employers and government. In Lyon the workforce in the silk industry had already revolted in 1831, 1834 and also joined the uprising in 1848. Though Tocqueville did not recognize this display of proletarian consciousness for what it was, his political antenna kept him sharp. In a speech to parliament at the end of January 1848, he signalled his anguish about the escalating unrest among the labouring poor. The immediate cause of the growing unrest was a recession combined with rising food prices. However, underlying this conjunctural crisis was in his perception the decisive battle between the propertied and the dispossessed classes that climaxed in Paris. The explosion he had predicted came after the reforms proposed by the radical camp were rejected in parliament. The abolition of the monarchy and its replacement by a republican constitution were broadly accepted. There was also little resistance to the hasty introduction of general suffrage, even though it still applied only to men.

Tocqueville had foreseen that the urban proletariat would, for the time being, remain a minority and could be outvoted by an electoral majority of the land-owning peasantry, by nature conservative. The breaking point in the negotiations proved to be the demand that paid work be made a constitutional right as protection against unregulated employment and irregular hiring and firing. There had been experiments with this form of job creation through *ateliers nationaux* for the execution of public works. Establishing them on a permanent footing became a precondition for political consensus. However, a parliamentary majority, with Tocqueville

at the forefront and in a counter-revolutionary role, refused to concede to this uncompromising demand. The immediate closing down of all public worksites led to the outbreak of the February 1848 revolution in Paris, which saw the victory of the liberal faction over the radical republicans.

Behind the momentous economic malaise, the structural development of the socialist movement instigated a wave of insurrection throughout Europe. At the end of 1847, in the prelude to the conflict that erupted in the streets of the French capital, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels had drawn up the *Communist Manifesto*, published when the revolt broke out. Conspicuous in Tocqueville's detailed account of the rebellion is that, besides the slum inhabitants, the retinue of servants that the wealthy elite surrounded themselves with in their opulent quarters turned against their masters and mistresses. The liberal philosopher and practitioner left no doubt on which side of the dividing line his sympathies lay. He was sharply critical of socialist ideology which, according to him, would culminate in centralized administration of a statist Moloch. His judgement of the support that socialism enjoyed among the proletariat was no less damning. They were a malevolent class lacking in discipline, order and regularity, without a sense of responsibility and with no respect for their superiors and betters. Ridden with radical aspirations – like the right to work and their insistence on collective action – that were impossible to grant, they went on strike and turned violent. Yet, he realized that his liberal credo implied the universal applicability of freedom and equality. The classless society of his dreams ultimately required admitting to mainstream society the working class that had so far been excluded from economic, political and social rights. Accepting the social justice of that claim and the right to a life of human dignity, he attached the condition that such admittance should not take place too quickly but in an orderly and gradual manner. And it should be accompanied by a willingness to adjust to the existing power and authority.

During the brutal suppression of the rebellion, Tocqueville took it upon himself to act as an intermediary between the parliamentary directorate, which he provided with information on the ongoing combat, and the military command, to which he passed on messages and orders. To be prepared for anything, he carried pistols when venturing into city districts where fighting was going on. It showed a dauntless determination that brought admiration from the partisan clique around him. His lack of oratory skills had proved no obstacle to his rise through the parliamentary hierarchy, where the fame he had acquired as a scholar played an important role. After Louis Philippe I had been dethroned, the transition from monarchy to republic was chaotic and halting. Tocqueville was a prominent member of

the parliamentary committee that drafted the constitution for the Second Republic and was appointed foreign minister in the new government. He held the post for only a few months, soon becoming disillusioned by the ambitions to greater power of President Louis Napoleon Bonaparte. Louis Napoleon's conversion from royalty – his father had been nominated king of Holland by his uncle, Napoleon Bonaparte – to republican statesman was not to last long. Shortly before his term of office expired, he seized power and a year later, after a national plebiscite, declared himself Emperor Napoleon III. Tocqueville had already expressed his displeasure and was dismissed, along with the rest of the cabinet. At the end of 1851, after speaking out against Louis Napoleon's coup along with a number of fellow parliamentarians, he was briefly detained. After this denouement, and partly due to failing health, he withdrew from active politics to focus on his academic interests. The result of this exertion – *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution* – was based on extensive archival research. When the book was published in 1856, it signified the completion only a few years before his death of scholarly work praised for lasting quality. It is a legacy seen as insightful and relevant up to the present day.

Exclusion from equality

How does this retrospective praise relate to the leading principle of Tocqueville's political credentials? The liberal ideology he adhered to was founded on the desirability of freedom and equality for humanity in its entirety. In my assessment of his life and work, I have already shown myself to be critical of the way he presented the dynamics of his time and his reservations about the progressive trend of democratization, bringing that worthy goal within reach. He grossly misconceived the spirit of his time, the capitalist ethos that set the pace and the direction of societal transformation. His preference was for a small-scale economy and localized governance founded on the bond between members of the community. Tocqueville believed that, in America, he had observed this much desired outcome in actual practice. The rural and small town way of life which became his focus was in stark contrast to the industrial mass production that would soon evolve in rapidly growing cities. He observed this shift in the economic landscape with apprehension, fearing an expanding and excessively regulatory government. He saw it as frustrating genuine democracy by destroying the equity and autonomy of the citizenry. The foresight with which he warned against the bureaucratization of a state that considered

itself all-powerful was indicative of his sociological acumen. However, I have strong reservations about his views on two problems pertinent to his investigations: the social and colonial questions. These two issues are severely underexposed in the widespread praise for his scholarly work and his liberal convictions. In both cases, the limits he imposes on qualifying for freedom and equality – despite being presented as universal rights – are justified with the same arguments. The majority of humanity with a history of exclusion from such rights belonged either to the swelling proletarian masses at home or the nations outside Europe which remained excluded from the drive of progress. Both were alleged to uphold a way of living and working that bore testimony to their pitiful lack of the moral standards required for civil rights. I will first look at Tocqueville's belief in the need to exclude lower classes in his own society and then at his urgent call to confine all humanity other than his own race in colonial dependency.

Tocqueville's ideas on the social question were no different from those of many of his contemporaries. It was a class-defined bias suggesting that the labouring poor themselves, deprived of their earlier right to public relief, did not endeavour and deserve to achieve inclusion in mainstream society by refusing to embrace the qualities required for the accumulation of property. It was considered their own fault that they failed to meet these requirements, caused by a lack of industriousness, thrift, sobriety and other virtues associated with decent behaviour. This school of thought would subsequently – from the 1870s onwards – be most potently expressed in the theory of social Darwinism, which stigmatized the victims of exclusion and explained pauperism as driven by sheer obnoxiousness or incapability to equip oneself for citizenship. Impelled by class-based narrow-mindedness, this odium came close to a racist judgement of pauperism in the advancing industrial-urban transformation.

I return to my earlier argument that Tocqueville's aristocratic identity led him to judge the nature of the social underclass with contempt. In his categorical view, society was divided into two nations, which were each other's opposite in appearance and behaviour. He described the difference between respected civility and despised vulgarity in candid racist jargon. When a frontman of the radical party known as the Montagnards arrived in the newly elected parliament, he denigrated him as of Lumpen class-cum-ethnic identity:

> His body was very large and fat, and his expressive head was triangular and sunk deep between his shoulders; his eyes were cunning and mischievous, but the rest of his features had a good-natured look. In short, it was a pretty

> shapeless lump of stuff, but within it was a mind subtle enough to know how to turn vulgarity and ignorance to advantage. (Tocqueville 1896: 148)

It was the same language used in social Darwinist publications to describe the Irish who crossed to England in search of factory work and found themselves treated as a degenerate and rebellious species of humanity. Charles Darwin himself wrote of them as modern savages who multiplied as rabbits and went through life careless, squalid and unaspiring (Breman 2016: 10). Tocqueville, too, had no qualms about describing these paupers as half-savages (Jardin 1984: 206), a clear reference to what he saw as their barbaric and wild lifestyle.

From propertyless to property-owning?

Remarkably enough, Tocqueville's boundless curiosity did not drive him to find out where the propertylessness came from that made the social question so impossible for him to solve. He adroitly avoided attributing the cause to capitalist accumulation and concluding that the concentration of property in the hands of a privileged class led to proletarianism at the bottom of society. This interrelationship had not escaped him, however, as is clear from the link he made between the spiralling enrichment and impoverishment he had encountered in Ireland. He argued that the concentration of land in the hands of estate owners was the consequence of inheritance law as practiced in the United Kingdom, which gave all property rights to the first-born son. But in his account of his tour through the Irish countryside, he described how fields fenced off for sheep grazing were earlier held communally or let out to tenants and sharecroppers. Declared private property during the enclosure movement, the agrarian property that was transferred into the hands of alien estate owners occurred at the expense of the peasantry, depriving them of the ability to use the land to grow food crops.

In the capitalist transition, property registered as privately owned was unassailable. From this perspective, the acquisition of property was considered the outcome of one's own efforts. That it may have been alienated from stakeholders who possibly had a more legitimate claim was not considered relevant. In Tocqueville's analysis, the fact that the peasantry – which he saw as an undifferentiated class of petty producers – continued to exist in France longer than in England was due to land being distributed equally among the males of the next generation. This difference in inheritance law did indeed seem to have resulted in a broader distribution of agrarian

property in France than in England. Yet, despite Tocqueville's familiarity with the rural milieu in France, he showed himself completely unaware of the capitalist intrusion into agriculture. The division of the rural population into landowners, tenants, sharecroppers and farmhands was a consequence of the proletarianization trend that had already started in the late-feudal era and resulted in the progressive expulsion of land-poor and landless segments from the countryside (Lefebvre 1954). Tocqueville noted the emergence of these modern nomads in his scholarly work, but without exploring – let alone explaining – their sizable presence or their origins.

The denial of the right to waged work was the immediate cause of the call to revolt in 1848. The ruthless suppression was seen as a triumph for civilization. And yet the right to work was the only possible alternative to the acquisition of property that the proletariat could hope for. Dispossessed, they had no other choice than to demand the security of paid employment at a rate sufficient to make ends meet. In both respects, what the working class ended up with fell short of what was required to satisfy their meagre needs. In the first place, there was no regular, continual employment. Tocqueville correctly attributed this to the persistent fluctuations in the industrial production process. The cycle of peaks and dips in the rhythm of work had many causes: expansion or contraction in business activity, mergers, divisions and bankruptcies, interruptions in the delivery of raw materials and difficulties in marketing the end product. Factory owners would hire or dismiss workers as they experienced successes or setbacks, without them having any say in the matter at all. Dismissed labourers would seek other employers, but the latter's tendency to hold a workforce in reserve, to keep wages at the lowest possible level, meant that workers had no guarantee at all that they would actually succeed in finding a new job. The situation was exacerbated by rising prices, exerting even greater pressure on the already tight budgets of working-class households.

This income deficit was behind the insistent demand for a wage linked to what was required for a decent livelihood. The call for higher living standards through both regular and government-regulated employment and pay was rejected by the dominant political class as excessive. Tocqueville fell back on his basic argument on the undesirability of unprecedented state interference in economic affairs, which would strengthen the trend towards bureaucratic centralization. Another criticism he put forward was that, behind what was presented as poverty, lay a steady improvement leading to a pressing desire for more. In his view, the prevailing form of employment and pay had risen to the maximum that could be conceded for the labour power provided. His argument was essentially that agreeing

to a higher wage would erode the legitimate share of gains between capital and labour. The political patrons of the propertied classes, including Tocqueville, rejected the right to guaranteed work because capitalism could not do without thoroughly proletarianized labour. It was a *conditio sine qua non* for the extraction of surplus value to increase a higher return on capital. The desire for ever more wealth that Tocqueville had spoken of in such disparaging terms in his second *Mémoire sur le paupérisme* was now endorsed as the right to accumulate capital. The dangerous radicalism with which this diverse social residue was obsessed came, as he argued, from a misplaced claim on more than they were due. He added that it was a steady improvement in their plight, rather than a deterioration, that had instigated them to revolt in 1848. Aside from whether his allegation is factually accurate, he suggested the emergence of a new mood in the ongoing transition to industrialism, which implied that what used to be wants had now become basic needs. Tocqueville was expressing a sociological phenomenon later described as relative deprivation or, alternately, as an expression of rising expectations. The politician who claimed that his engagement was driven by liberalism left no doubt that the deserving ranks stopped with the lower middle class, the very sizable contingent of petty owners of property. Excluded from civil order, the working classes stagnated in a state of inferiority. Once dispossessed, they did not merit the privilege of citizenship and thus, in his argumentation, belonged to the ranks of the 'undeserving poor'.

Rejected as undeserving on grounds of class and race

The colonial question can be discussed more briefly as Tocqueville's main concern was how it could be helpful in solving the social question at home. The call to subjugate non-Western regions and their peoples to European domination is, of course, irreconcilable with the enticing ideal of universalized freedom and equality. Tocqueville did not attempt to justify foreign conquest as inspired by the noble desire to bring civilization where it was lacking, as suggested in proper imperialist fashion. In his view, expansion beyond Europe was intended to defuse the escalating class struggle in the European metropoles and ensure that the intricate process of multinational state formation proceeded as it should by appealing to patriotism on the home front. Enlightenment thought at the end of the eighteenth century declared the fundamental equality of all people and the associated right to self-determination. By the beginning of the nineteenth century this credo,

which inspired the slogans of the French revolution, had already been revoked and reversed to imply the opposite. The liberalism Tocqueville advocated stopped at the borders of his own country. In the pursuit of colonial domination, freedom and equality were out of the question. But he disagreed with John Stuart Mill, who considered despotism justified in combating barbarism. Nor did he go as far as his fellow liberals in excluding non-Western races from all progress.

Tocqueville saw the path to civilization as a series of phases that started with primitive savagery as a way of life in which individuals were equal to each other in weakness and ignorance. In the final stage, as yet not achieved, he envisaged a social order in which people would live in classless equality and share the resources required to ensure their joint welfare and mutual protection against adversity. Between these two extremes was the reign of inequality, which he referred to as the 'middle ages' of humanity. He described the scaling up to this intermediate phase in detail for India (Jardin 1984). It was achieved when nomadic savages settled down to a sedentary and agrestic way of life. The unequal claim to land resulted in a stratified social structure that was constituted and consolidated in feudalism. The ongoing development of an industrial economy in Europe was immanently unstable and led inevitably to enrichment at one extreme and impoverishment at the other. In Tocqueville's view, democratization would offer an escape from the class struggle and complete the civilization process, climaxing in nationwide homogeneity.

In this perception, it was the half-developed civilizations that France and other European powers should focus on in their imperialist projects. Tocqueville was full of praise for the way India had become subjected to British authority:

> A country almost as large as Europe has been conquered within a space of sixty years by a few thousand Europeans, who landed as merchants upon its shores. A hundred million people have been subjected and ruled by thirty thousand foreigners who, for their laws, religion, language and customs, have nothing in common with them and who, moreover, do not let them take any part in the management of their own business. (Bernard 2014: 18)

Tocqueville was no less jubilant about the imminent European conquest of China. He urged this course of expansion in unadulterated jingoism and applauded the outbreak of the Opium War in 1839, aimed at subjugating China:

> So at last the mobility of Europe has come to grips with Chinese immobility! It is a great event, especially if one thinks that it is only the continuation, the last in a multitude of events of the same nature of all which are pushing the European race out of its home and are successively submitting all the other races to its empire or its influence. Something more vast, more extraordinary than the establishment of the Roman Empire is growing out of our times, without anyone noticing it, it is the enslavement of four parts of the world by the fifth. Therefore, let us not slander our century and ourselves too much; the men are small, but the events are great. (Cited in Pitts 2000: 301)

The imperialism Tocqueville fervently advocated can also be seen as compensation for the French loss of territorial *Lebensraum* that had expanded so substantially under Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte. In that sense, the conquest of Algeria was a response to the political constraints the European allies imposed on France at the Congress of Vienna in 1814-15. But France's urge to colonize extended further than Algeria and led to the occupation of parts of North and West Africa and on the Southeast-Asian peninsula. All the territories already earlier conquered in the Caribbean region were retained.

Tocqueville was much interested in South Asia and in a hefty, never published minute, narrated the introduction and implementation of British rule in India. Drawing on published documents which were at his disposal in the early 1840s, he argued that British rule had redeemed the subcontinent of South Asia from barbarism by coaching its people to incipient civilization. The Indian mutiny in 1857 implied, however, that the progress made still fell short of adequate and effective governance. Repression of this rebellion was needed to forestall a return to barbarism. Shortly returned from a scholarly trip to England, Tocqueville wrote this advice to one of his high-level contacts:

> To see the English rule in India being overthrown without anything to replace it and leaving the indigenous people to barbarism would be to me a very sad prospect. Such a situation would be a disaster for the future of civilization and the progress of mankind.... It is often said in France that you have oppressed the Hindus. I think the opposite, and I believe that your present danger comes on the contrary from bringing them closer to civilization and giving them, in governance and administration, sounder ideas, so that you have made them more of a danger to their masters and decreased your authority thereby. (Bernard 2014: 25)

Tocqueville's analysis of Asia's backwardness differed from that put forward by Karl Marx. Marx's appraisal was no less Eurocentric but was inspired by the assumption that colonial expansion was preconditional for breaking though the immanent stagnation ascribed to a stultifying Asiatic mode of production. A crucial obstacle in his analysis for progress was the absence of private property which prevented transition from the stage of feudalism to capitalism (Avineri 1969). The division of the world in the manner Tocqueville had insisted on was decided at the 1878 Congress of Berlin. This alliance of the leading European power mongers settled the Eastern question, as Bismarck called the usurpation of the non-Western world, to the satisfaction of the aspiring colonizers among them.

Despite his racialized prejudices, the liberal thinker explicitly turned against the biological determinism on which Arthur de Gobineau based his racist theories. Gobineau's preaching was not compatible with the ideas of Rousseau, to whom Tocqueville owed his belief in the universal validity of freedom and equality. The idea of civilization proceeding in phases that Tocqueville adhered to prevented him from classifying ethnicity in terms of genetic inferiority. He also rejected Gobineau's designation of Aryan tribes as the master race. In Tocqueville's view, people could free themselves from savagery and elevate themselves to a higher level of society, demonstrating their capacity to achieve progress. On the other hand, no nations other than those of Europe (in Gobineau's terminology, the Nordic race) had succeeded in attaining the mature phase in the linear process of civilization. That could not be coincidence. The clear contrast between domination and subjugation only exacerbated the differences, illustrated by Tocqueville's controversial statement that in America 'the abolition of slavery in the South will increase the repugnance felt by the white population for the blacks' (Tocqueville 2000: 328). He was equally outspoken on his doubts whether black and white people could ever live together on equal terms. Michel Onfray is sharply critical of the way in which, in his tour around America, Tocqueville commended the colonists who had fought to end their colonial subordination. But the freedom and equality that marked their democracy was reserved for members of the white race. Citizenship and the rights associated with it were out of the question for ethnic minorities – i.e. the imported slaves and the indigenous people, killed or held captive in marginal tracts – whose exclusion Tocqueville justified in blatantly racist language (Onfray 2017). The impossibility of their integration in a multiracial state inspired him to propose the idea of full-fledged and indefinite segregation, a duality in the colonial state set up that effectively and indefinitely blocked release to freedom and equality. Various American historians have strongly

contradicted Tocqueville's racialized bias. In his case study focused on colonial Virginia, Edmund S. Morgan (1975) wrote that the colonists owed the freedom they gained to their slaves. Independence, he concluded, was bought with and at the cost of slave labour.

The ban on slavery in the colonies introduced during the revolution was rescinded under Napoleon. When he entered parliament in 1839, Tocqueville was appointed rapporteur to the committee established to abolish slavery again. His report, submitted within two months, proposed abolition as of 1853 and was a compromise that went far to appeasing the colonial lobby. While slaveholders would receive compensation for their loss of property, the former slaves – some 250,000 in the West Indies – remained deprived of all means of production. They were banned from buying land for a fixed period of time. The transformation of this enslaved contingent into a landless proletariat was intended to turn them into bonded labourers. The decision confirmed that the propertied class required a subaltern class kept firmly dispossessed to secure an adequate pool of labour which would continue to work at the lowest possible price. Tocqueville was equally disparaging about the working class of his own nation as he had been about its colonial subjects. This set his declaration of the fundamental universality of the human race at odds with the enduring domination of the overwhelming majority by a small minority, whether within or beyond the boundaries of the nation state.

Colonial expansion was founded on the permanent domination of the conquered lands and peoples. At least, as long as resistance to deprivation of the right to self-determination could be repressed. That was the purpose of the dividing line between the dominating and the dominated race. For Tocqueville, stringent segregation was the perfect way to consolidate the exercise of colonial power in Algeria. He expressed his admiration for how a handful of Englishmen held the entire population of South Asia locked up in their power from a distance. Such despotism was incompatible with the universal validity of the liberal order he aspired to achieve. This paradox could be negated, or at least extenuated, with the argument that the superiority of one group and the inferiority of the other was due to lacking development rather than exclusion. I conclude that the democracy that Tocqueville held dear did not extend beyond the propertied classes of the supreme white race. His avowed determination to achieve emancipation for all and sundry collapsed in its denial in political practice. The onslaught of imperialism meant that, by the turn of the century, the doctrine of racial inequality had become respectable wide and far. It is difficult to argue persuasively that Tocqueville resisted this retrogressive mindset intellectually and politically. His version

of liberalism denied freedom and equality to the lion's share of humanity, which remained excluded from both fundamental rights. His judgement on the colonial question was in no way different to his reactionary perspective on the social question both within and beyond the borders of his homeland.

In hindsight

The significance of Tocqueville's political stance is not restricted to the past. Although the ideas he stood for and heralded declined after his death, less than a century later his name was once again in the political and academic spotlight. Politics and governments in the Atlantic economies initially seemed to have succeeded in restraining the free marketing of capitalism by introducing centrally controlled reforms to protect the workforce and the population as a whole. The relative ease with which this occurred marked the advent of the Western European welfare state. But as it was further expanded in the decades after World War II, known in France as *Les Trente Glorieuses*, resistance from the dissenting camp, which had never disappeared completely, began to gather momentum. Conservative and liberal proponents of a radical change of course cited Tocqueville's writings as the source of their criticism of state interference. Friedrich Hayek, seen by many as the founder of neoliberalism, revered Tocqueville as an early apostle of his ideas and as a mine of inspiration for his anti-socialist manifesto *The Road to Serfdom* (1944). This admiration should be matched with less enthusiastic appraisals. Seymour Drescher (1968a), familiar with Tocqueville's work as no other, draws up a different balance, concluding that the political thinker's sociological astuteness lost out to his political prejudices. He summed up his verdict by saying that Tocqueville had described a society that did not exist and never would.

In my discussion of Tocqueville's legacy, I have focused on his views on the social and colonial questions. Regarding the former, his rejection of public poverty relief has been welcomed with great enthusiasm in the neoliberal camp, especially in America. Tocqueville's unequivocal condemnation of public welfare explains why the Institute for Economic Affairs, a neoliberal think tank, decided to bring out his first essay on pauperism in its Rediscovered Riches series. It comes as no surprise that his scornful comment on the costly, bossy but useless bunch of bureaucrats in charge of public relief is much appreciated by today's anti-state cabal. Has the gist of Tocqueville's more sophisticated argumentation in his second memoir been dealt with fairly and fully in the introductory commentary which precedes

the republication of the first one in 1997? Not really, and I fully agree with other critics who take the editors to task for having misread the author's thoughts on how to tackle pauperism. Tocqueville's sociological insight induced him to highlight dispossession as the outcome of a civilizational trend towards increasing inequality. What Tocqueville described as a historical process is stereotyped in their editorial diatribe as the innate indolence of an undeserving underclass. This neoconservative caucus devotes less attention to his praise for colonialism. The imperialist ideology, manifest of the nineteenth century, lingers on in the juxtaposition of frontrunners versus latecomers and the racism inherent to it has taken root in a virulent ultranationalist gospel. Tocqueville's recommendation to anchor the nation state in a fabricated profile of commonality excludes people who do not share that *Blut und Boden* legacy from enjoying equal rights in full citizenship. His attempt to cover up the contradictions and disparities between social classes culminates in a politics of categorical segregation, both beyond and within the homeland.

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Part II

The Coolie Scandal on Sumatra's East Coast

Figure 3.1. The coolie scandal in Deli. A well-heeled and self-righteous Delian carrying *De Planter* (The planter) in his pocket. Source: E.F. von Wechmar, *Delianer. Collectie lithografieën* (Delians: A collection of lithographs), Medan, 1927.

3 Dutch Colonialism and Its Racist Impact

[One comes to hate those savages – hate them to the death....
No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it –
this suspicion of their not being inhuman.
– Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* ([1902] 1983: 47, 69)

The coolie scandal on Sumatra's East Coast

In the early twentieth century Dutch public opinion was caught unawares and justifiably shocked by what became known as the 'coolie scandal'. This event concerned the regime of unfree labour as practiced in the large-scale agro-industry on Sumatra's East Coast. From the middle of the nineteenth century onwards plantations had been established in this primeval forest region to grow commercial crops for sale on the global market. Operated by an expatriate management and an Asian workforce imported from outside, tobacco cultivation became booming business on these estates. Their rapidly growing number yielded high profits for the pioneering planters. Johannes van den Brand, a local whistle-blower, published in 1902 a pamphlet – *De millioenen uit Deli* (The millions from Deli) – in which he documented tales of horror and terror to which the coolies in the expanding plantation belt were subjected. Authorities both in the colony and at home denied the story told as baseless but under pressure from the minister of colonies, the governor-general of the Netherlands Indies ordered an official enquiry in 1903. A public prosecutor was sent to Deli on a fact-finding mission in order to disprove the accusations that had been made. When engrossed in research on labour migration in colonial South and Southeast Asia, I stumbled on a reference to the Rhemrev report and decided to dig deeper and find out what happened. In *Koelies, planters en koloniale politiek* (1987; English edition: *Taming the Coolie Beast*, 1989), I opened up what appeared to have been a neglected chapter in Dutch colonial history: the labour regime in Deli's plantation belt in the early twentieth century.

The findings submitted by Johannes L.T. Rhemrev, the official investigator, were included as an annex in my study. When minister A.W.F. Idenburg refused to make the contents public, or even to give members of parliament access to it, the report disappeared from scrutiny. In the autumn of 1982,

when the document lay before me on a table in the National Archives in The Hague, I believed I was the first person in many decades to have set eyes upon it. Drawing attention to its contents had to wait until I completed what I had begun to write, a background sketch which grew into a full-length monograph. To my surprise the document had already been registered in the catalogue of the library of the Royal Tropical Institute in Amsterdam, probably without anyone ever having been aware of its availability. It must have arrived in 1966 when, after the closing down of the East Coast of Sumatra Institute, all its books and archives were moved to the central library, which was housed in the same building. That this institute, set up and financed jointly by the plantation corporations of the region, had a copy in its collection seemed to imply that the planters' lobby were familiar with its contents. It is impossible to find out from when this inside knowledge dated. The leader of the Social Democratic Labour Party (Sociaal-Democratische Arbeiderspartij, SDAP) had alluded in a parliamentary debate that the president of the Planters' Committee had been allowed to see the report even before it had reached the minister in charge of colonial affairs. Once the report had been submitted to the governor-general of the Netherlands Indies, it was deliberately kept from public and political eyes. Only a small circle of insiders – civil servants and the planters' lobby – were given access to it. As its political sensitivity waned in the subsequent decades the report lost its seal of secrecy but because of a lack of scholarly interest, its whereabouts in colonial archives remained unnoticed.

It seemed that Rhemrev's report was much less difficult to trace than I had presumed.[1] If this was so, why had no one looked for it earlier? Or, if the report had been found, why wasn't it revealed to a wider audience? There are sound reasons for asking this question, since its publication in my book immediately caught the public eye and was widely discussed in the media. One of the reviewers called it the most atrocious revelation of the century for the Netherlands and various other comments in the public press ran him a close second. Why it was possible to ignore the contents of this source for so long is in my opinion inextricably linked to the tenacious inclination to play down the darker side of the colonial enterprise. Once published the report could no longer be wished away. It would seem that precisely the decision of the authorities not to make Rhemrev's findings known enabled both the planters and the colonial state to challenge the substance and veracity of the document. With the shocking contents before

1 More copies were made and distributed to the directors of some of the large plantations companies (Endt 1918: 1-38).

us it seems far more difficult to deny the facts noted in minute detail or to water down the conclusions reached by the public prosecutor.

A blot on a clean slate?

I came to know that this mindset was not so foregone during the book launch held in 1987 at the Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde (Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies, KITLV) in Leiden. Many newspapers had already published reviews in the week before this event took place. Trying to contextualize the 'coolie scandal' in Deli on a broader canvass, I referred in my opening speech to the fascinating study of Michael Taussig (1987). Published only a short while before, he described the horrendous crimes to which the Indian rubber tappers in the Amazon region had been subjected during the first decades of the twentieth century. When after my introduction the opportunity to ask questions arose, several members of the audience, speaking up for the old colonial hands still abundantly around, were eager to convince me that the atrocities narrated had never occurred in Java, exceptionally so during the pioneering stage on the East Coast of Sumatra, and even then only on isolated plantations or on estates under non-Dutch management. The purport was quite clear: planters of proper Dutch vintage did not stoop to that level. These sorts of excuses were inspired more by a lust for denial than by a desire to set the record straight. Some of the reactions in the press took the same line. Such irascible feelings were also vented in a leading daily newspaper:

> [Y]et another writer who preaches 'down with us', something which we have been able to harp on in the post-war period. It is bad enough that the atrocities mentioned were perpetrated, but is knowledge being served by raking it all up again? I would prefer to feel deeply ashamed and then keep silent. (*NRC* 1987)

I was well acquainted with this argument since I had come across it while reading through the colonial planters' literature written in the 'something great has been achieved' style. The existence of a seamy side had better be left alone. All those who 'indulged' in it were accused of bad faith and of wanting to spoil our fine colonial record. From the long series of excesses which would confirm this distortion stands out a piece of information, which did the rounds once more in 1913, stating that Jacobus Nienhuys, renowned

as a pioneer planter and founder of the famous Deli Company, was made to leave Sumatra's East Coast in a dreadful hurry. Not because of his bad health – the reason given at the time – but to avoid judicial prosecution for having flogged seven coolies to death. An embarrassing story, of course nowhere to be found in the historiography of the corporation which had expanded to become a state in a state. In an attempt to erase this smudge on its proud record, the Deli Company instigated an official investigation as early as 1875, but the colonial official (*controleur*) to whom this delicate mission was entrusted did not succeed in refuting the accusation. His conclusion quite ominously said that it was not possible to substantiate that the alleged facts had no foundation. Even to find this incriminating verdict, one will seek in vain in the standard colonial works on the East Coast of Sumatra's plantations.[2] Johannes van den Brand, who blew the whistle on the bad news, was maligned and exorcized from the European community in Medan in the wake of his indictment of both planters and officials (Breman 1992c). I also wrote a short article about two other main actors in the 'coolie scandal': The public prosecutor Rhemrev, a man of Indo-European descent as his name suggests, was of course the most intriguing of them. Rhemrev was victimized rather than rewarded for a job well done. He failed in his further career to achieve promotion in the judicial hierarchy. He was put on the list to be awarded a royal distinction, but his name was taken off the honours list, again on confidential advice, spiced up with heavy racist overtones, of the head of the regional bureaucracy of Sumatra's East Coast (Breman 1992b). Bernard Hoetink was appointed as the first director of the Labour Inspectorate on the East Coast of Sumatra, set up in the wake of the Rhemrev report to strengthen state supervision over the work regime and the treatment of the indentured coolies on the plantations. He resigned when he was found to be less pliable than his superiors and the captains of the plantation industry wanted him to be.

Leafing through the splendidly illustrated jubilee volumes of the plantation enterprises published during the colonial period makes it next to impossible to relate these images of how the coolies lived and worked to the grim and brutal reality. Opening up the jungle on Sumatra's East Coast and laying out plantations took a heavy toll on the imported workforce. In these early years the death rate had been atrociously high with one source

2 Back in Amsterdam, Nienhuys had a huge mansion built for him along one of the main canals which now houses the NIOD Instituut voor Oorlogs-, Holocaust- en Genocidestudies (NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies). The institute's documentation contains no reference to the first owner's serial manslaughter in his colonial past.

reporting that in 1869, 213 out of a total of 800 to 900 recruited coolies died before their contract of two to three years had run out (Schadee 1918). Mortality remained exceedingly high although it came down in the final decades of the nineteenth century (Van Klaveren 1997: 122; Stoler 1985). By how much is impossible to estimate as some planters were wont to get rid of terminally ill or dying coolies, dumping them in the bush on or outside the estate. Even though I was fully conscious of the contrast between fact and fancy, I had not armed myself against it and began to doubt my own judgement about the validity of the rare sources which described the pitiful, even criminal treatment of sick coolies. How could this narrative of atrocities be reconciled with the photographs of well-equipped plantation hospitals with immaculate wards and the – seemingly – enviable material benefits and welfare provisions which embellished the memorial volumes even before the turn of the century? No doubt, the biography of the plantation doctor J.A.I. Tschudnowsky told a horrendous story. But was this outsider not speaking about a past which had already gone when Rhemrev began his investigation? Didn't I make myself guilty of misrepresenting the real progress in healthcare which had already come about? How credible would my critical appraisal appear if I was found out to have wilfully overlooked statistics and annual reports which noted a growing number of doctors, paramedics, a much improved infrastructure and a falling death rate?

A façade of reforms

The reason I did not retract on my initial judgement was the discovery of fresh evidence pertaining to the years immediately before and after Rhemrev had submitted his report. From the workforce of a mining company 139 coolies had died between January and September 1900 which amounted to annual mortality of nearly 25 per cent. In his tour of inspection Hoetink, at the time still as colonial official charged with Chinese Affairs, mentioned that

> if a coolie dies, the company supplies a piece of white cotton cloth to wrap up the corpse and would then leave it to a few coolies for internment which means that the grave is usually so close to the surface that wild pigs have no problem to feed on the corpse. (Hoetink 1901: x)

In a memorandum addressed to the resident of the East Coast of Sumatra, the government health inspector in the region described in late 1901 how he had found the inmates of plantation hospitals in a filthy condition, deprived

of any form of care and even without food. He profusely condemned the indifferent behaviour of the medical practitioner in charge, labelled the treatment of the patients revolting and cruel, and claimed that this was a case of deliberate dereliction of duty. The quotations below exemplify his verdict.

> A severely ill woman had been laid on a framework of wire netting on four legs; the only mattress the woman had was a piece of gunny sack; she had no pillow so that she had to lie on the wire netting using her arm as a pillow. She was suffering from venereal disease, aggravated by cystitis; vaginal fluid dripped from between her legs onto the floor, there was no sign of a basin or any other receptacle in which that fluid could be caught; the flies homed in on that fluid. (Maier 1901)

The same official came across another completely neglected woman who lay at death's door,

> dreadfully fouled and unwashed; [a] wound on [her] left buttock, very probably the result of bedsores; the back of the right foot badly scraped, leading to the formation of a wound. This patient had already lain here for approximately one month. She wore an old, fouled, soiled sarong and kebaya and lay on a wooden bedstead on a putrid gunnysack; she had no pillow. Faeces and urine were found underneath her; neither wound betrayed any sign of medical treatment!!! (Maier 1901)

Observations like these are indispensable and supplement the repertoire of excesses documented by Rhemrev. No doubt, digesting such evidence elicited feelings of shock and compassion with the victims. Yet another tone, present as an undercurrent in the reviews of my book, caught my attention even more: the implicit suggestion that Rhemrev's report once submitted must have at least put paid to the abuses listed. Furnished with the information provided by the public prosecutor, the government would have had no choice but to initiate the most essential reforms immediately. Whatever painstaking efforts made to keep it secret, his report was supposed to mark a turning point in the lax check the colonial state had kept on plantation business. In an attempt to end the public discussion about the 'coolie scandal' the policymakers would have felt obliged to assume responsibility for the abusive state of affairs. In a series of measures they seemed to have pledged to do so and thus end this black page.

I tried to quell my scepticism about this wishful thinking by pointing out the continuation of the miserable plight of the indentured workforce in

the final chapter of my book. I may have failed to convey my reservations adequately, because in most reviews neither the continuation of the merciless regime nor the question how this could have possibly been tolerated was mentioned, even in passing. This led me to conclude that the dark side of the colonial project was meant to be wiped from collective memory. The naïve suggestion seemed to have been that what the government and the planters had in close alliance covered up was now finally in the public domain. This sigh of relief is misconceived. Rhemrev dealt only with the official verification of gruesome facts, which, amazingly, had already been well established for quite some time. It also needs to be understood that Van den Brand, who instigated the public uproar, shocked public opinion not as the discloser of unknown facts but as a moral accuser. He was the first whistle-blower to analyse systematically what for many years the colonial media had paid attention to only incidentally. The power of his pamphlet is that he denounced what was found perfectly natural among the colonial in-crowd: the denial of the human qualities and rights of the coolies. Even more persuasive than what he had drawn from his own experience as a practising lawyer in Medan were the announcements he reprinted from newspapers promising a bounty for the return of runaway coolies. The Uncle Tom association was impossible to miss. Scattered among the pages of his first booklet were also advertisements in which coolies and cattle were offered for sale in one and the same breath. It is mind-boggling that in the colonial milieu only defying individuals like Van den Brand seem to have taken offence of what was considered 'normal'. The shock of recognition which followed was confined to the homeland of the expatriate community, and even there created only a temporary outburst of sympathy, but certainly induced no change in colonial mentalities. It also failed to end the miserable plight in which plantation coolies worked and lived. The effort to keep secret what was illegal as well as the pernicious unwillingness to heed the racialized abuses exposed should be foregrounded in the analysis of colonial policy in the early twentieth century.

The fabrication of a contract

The lack of freedom of the coolies remained a feature not just of the work regime on the plantation but also of the recruitment drive in the countryside of Java. The labour brokers acting as touts who press-ganged the coolies were guilty of all sorts of misdeeds, varying from deceit and intimidation to brutal force. In 1905, an agent in Hong Kong informed his superiors in Deli that recruitment was only free in name. The official memoranda which

looked into these unlawful practices invariably insisted that the complaints had to be dismissed as groundless or exaggerated, and could be ignored as outdated and evidence of past misdemeanour (Stecher 1905b: 1-2; Kuenen 1906: 8-9). However, right up to the end of the colonial period in the villages of Java, the rumour that contractors were prowling around in the vicinity created so much anxiety that mothers used to keep their children at home.

Reports continued to be written, as they had been earlier, not to ferret out the truth, but to tailor to legality what was not condoned. In the final instance, abuses could be excused by pointing the finger at the coolies themselves as instigators of these unfounded allegations. The 'natives', afflicted with a childishly primitive mentality, simply lacked the mindset necessary to behave as rational and responsible adults. One commentator argued that, when hiring a horse, one did not make a contract with the beast itself but with its owner (Ezerman 1912: 1287). Likewise, the employers obstinately continued to claim that the medical inspection and transport of the contracted labourers were beyond reproach. The pretence was that the coolies contracted themselves not under duress but freely. The advance paid out on recruitment indentured them to the employer. A great deal of what happened could not stand exposure to the public gaze: the incarceration of coolies in a dilapidated depot or in a camp assigned to lock up convicts, transportation under harsh supervision and a manner of selection which robbed them of human dignity. The coolies had no say in their destination and were not free to choose where to go: 'This is decided by the emigration office and determined by hanging a small board with the name of the plantation around their necks before they were photographed; strangely enough, the people seemed satisfied with this high-handed and arbitrary procedure' (Stecher 1905b: 5). Crammed below decks on board the ships on which they were taken to Sumatra, they were deprived of even the most elementary amenities. Although the voyage lasted several days, in 1906 the medical inspector still thought that there was no need to provide sleeping accommodation.

> The various places were indicated on the deck by coloured stripes, leaving several pathways open for inspection.... Any other furnishings would do nothing to heighten comfort, only to increase the squalor. One just has to think of the fruit peel, the betel *quids* and the detritus of seasickness. (Kuenen 1906: 22)

No wonder that the coolies arrived in a tattered and exhausted condition. Very appropriately they were noted down in the bills of lading as '*colli*', that is as cargo. The last part of the journey from the harbour of Belawan to the

estate in the interior was carried out in closed train wagons. It was a manner of transportation which conjures up the image of cattle herds. Commodities and beasts – these associations were not in the least fortuitous. From the moment of their recruitment, the treatment of the coolies was devised to dehumanize them, even before being put to work began their degradation to a mere commodity.

Insistence on the penal sanction in the work contract

Behind the posture of rigorous official surveillance with the mandate to thoroughly check on abuses and the detailed listing of improvements and progress made in due course, the dark side of the plantation remained covered up. No doubt, more than before legal action was taken against 'excesses', at least to the extent district authorities found out and owed up to them. In the long run this interference will have exerted a moderating influence on the impunity with which the planters used to take the law into their own hands. But initially prohibition of this customary practice had little effect. Even ten years after the reforms had become statutory a judicial officer could declare that nowhere in the archipelago were workers beaten as badly as they were on the Deli plantations. Not the annual inspection reports but whistle-blowers and a mix of dissenters told the story as it was. Among the colonial establishment they found no hearing for their contrarious and unwelcome documentation. A.M.C. Bruinink-Darlang's informative dissertation (1986) on the penitentiary system in the Netherlands Indies is replete with examples of atrocious excesses. In a work camp during the building of the Sumatra highway between 1912 and 1914 a pole was erected to which labourers were tied with iron chains and flogged, or tortured in some other way, when their white supervisor deemed they were not working hard enough. He was charged with manslaughter and during the hearing of this case it was revealed that inflicting pain on coolies was an everyday occurrence and that the civil servants responsible had once again 'neglected' to inform themselves of this routine or to report it to their superiors. The harsh treatment combined with the abominable medical provisions meant that the death rate was very high. These facts became public knowledge merely a few years after the abuses on the East Coast of Sumatra had been extensively discussed.

Nevertheless, a debate on the sustained extralegal collusion between colonial governance and corporate business has remained scrupulously avoided. Such a short and fragmented memory on what happened cannot but arouse suspicion. The dissertation just mentioned and thoroughly ignored, elaborates

on the brutalization of the prisoners condemned to work as convict labour. The majority of them were estate coolies sentenced for breaches of their labour contract (Van Rossum 2018). As head of the government apparatus the resident of the East Coast of Sumatra gave his wholehearted support to a petition which the planters submitted to the governor-general in 1910, requesting him to tighten up the regime to which the convicts were subjected. Arduous work such as draining swamps, shifting soil, collecting gravel, breaking stones and similar chores for ten hours a day under strict supervision during which the convicts were not allowed to talk to each other was the prescription proposed for trespassing coolies on the plantation belt. Against the negative advice of several of his top civil servants, Idenburg, appointed now as governor-general, acceded to these requests from the managers of the Deli agro-industry.

Still acting as minister of colonies, Idenburg had swept the Rhemrev report under the carpet, with his handwritten comment 'a lamentable history of suffering and injustice'. Toeing the line of capitalist business, he readily subscribed to the view of the management of plantation industry that the Asian coolie could only be changed into a pliable and diligent worker by putting in the boot. On his next posting in the Netherlands Indies as governor-general in charge of the colonial bureaucracy, he gave instruction in 1911 not only to exacerbate the regime of forced labour on Sumatra's East Coast but, to make matters worse, to give the detainees poorer quality food, all of which was supposed to prevent that the coolies from considering that punishment for their breaches of contract at least liberated them from the merciless yoke under which they were exploited and oppressed on the estates (Bruinink-Darlang 1986: 88-94). Idenburg elected to balance his partiality to the interests of corporate business when he opposed in 1913 the introduction in Java of the penal sanction, as demanded by the agro-industrial lobby. In a letter to the prime minister in the Netherlands, the governor-general wrote that in his eyes the plight of the indigenous population weighed more heavily. It was a choice to which he then felt bound:

> [A] great deal of courage and strength is required to offer resistance for months on end to the daily insistence to do what would please 'capital' and what would also not displease many civil servants. But to give in to pressure from that corner would have been to act against my conscience. (Cited in Brouwer 1958: 31)

It is the sort of righteous stance which has formed the cornerstone of Idenburg's reputation as an early and prominent exponent of the so-called Ethical Policy. In this demeanour he has been written up in colonial history

(Koch 1960: 11). A glimpse behind the scenes, that is to say, a reading of confidential memoranda, reveals that there is little foundation for such a positive judgement. First as minister of colonies and later on as governor-general, Idenburg passed up the opportunity to put an end to the indentured coolie regime and the excesses to which it gave rise in Sumatra's plantation belt.

Hoetink was the first colonial official to be nominated labour inspector of the agency set up in the aftermath of Van den Brand's accusations. On his resignation a few years later he indicated that improvement in the fate of the workforce on the plantations would be out of the question as long as the old ordinance was still in force (Hoetink 1905). In the light of the aberrations reported, there were good enough reasons to do away with the penal sanction. The need for reforms was corroborated even by hard-line proponents, but they insisted on maintaining the punitive clauses in the contract. An official designated in 1905 to revise the coolie ordinance acknowledged the interests of the plantation corporations, but his watered-down final version published in 1910 remained unacceptable to them. The pressure exerted by the planters' lobby impeded the government from adopting the proposal to modify, and, in the last instance, to abolish the penal sanction in the work contract. Having foreseen this outcome, the official who had submitted the draft wrote a pamphlet in which he blamed Idenburg for having taken the side of the planters and retracting on his oft-repeated promise that unfree labour should be abolished (Van Blommestein 1917). 'The whip', i.e. the penal sanction as pinnacle of the coolie ordinance, was retained.

A fitting conclusion to this episode was the announcement at the beginning of the 1920s that staff members of the labour inspectorate were convinced that the penal sanction was and should remain an indispensable part of the work contract. The counsel which these insiders expressed reinforces the suspicion that as the years passed the government agency, founded to protect the coolies, changed its role to that of a disciplinary instrument in the hands of the planters. In her final chapter, Bruinink-Darlang summarized the close correspondence which existed between the labour regime in the capitalist agro-industry and the system of penal servitude as an integral part of colonial domination:

> The circumstances under which contract coolies were obliged to work on the plantations were the same as those of those of the convicts employed in the coal mines and at the construction of the Sumatra Road. Besides, the penal system had an important place in the coolie ordinance, by the regulation of the penal sanction, which was included in it to facilitate the maintenance of authority by the employers. (1986: 415)

Plantation industry on Sumatra's East Coast continued to expand in the late colonial period. The size of the coolie workforce which stood at 95,000 in 1906 had increased to 200,000 in 1920 to peak at nearly 300,000 by the end of the next decade. Tobacco, which had been the main crop in the pioneering years, remained a major commodity but many of the new estates diversified to rubber and oil palm production. It was a shift in cultivation which changed the ethnic composition of the workforce. Coolies were now mainly recruited from Java where the peasant population was prevented from opening up waste land around their village for farming in the wake of the Agrarian Law promulgated in 1870. The resulting loss of livelihood opportunities forced a growing number of the land poor and landless peasantry to seek waged labour in the capitalist sector of the economy. Contractors roamed around the rural districts to source among this agrarian proletariat coolies for shipment to Deli's plantations.

Voicing dissent

A few dissenters in the bureaucracy refused to abide by the colonial decrees issued and were taken to task for their resistance. That happened, for instance, to an assistant resident who dared to point out the frequent and disproportionately harsh punishments to which the police magistrate sentenced the coolies for minor breaches of the ordinance. The planters were quick to lodge serious complaints against such judgements, which were followed by the transfer of the official concerned. The charge about the poor health of many plantation labourers filed two years later by a hospital doctor had just as little effect. He felt forced to resign. Before he left, he wrote a letter to the director of the Department of Justice in which he stated that many of his patients had to be admitted either in a malnourished state or required medical attention as the result of maltreatment (Bruinink-Darlang 1986: 99). The remaining part of this essay attempts to put the relationship between European master and Asiatic servant made manifest in a very extreme form in this region in the broader context of the late-colonial situation.

One reviewer of my book informed me of a source which portrays, from the European perspective, life and work on the Sumatran tobacco plantations a few years after the dawn of the twentieth century. In his rambling career Apie Prins came to Deli in 1908 and narrated what he experienced in a vividly written autobiography. He owed his arrival on Sumatra's East Coast and a job as junior manager to family connections with a member of the board of directors of a plantation company. Although he was already

then a dedicated non-conformist, Prins soon got used to the demands the plantation made on its European staff. A tough demeanour was required to earn the respect of both the coolies and the bosses. He learnt this lesson immediately on arrival and did not hesitate to practice it:

> Giving a Chinese a smack on his bald head was commonplace. If they were idling around or obstinate, you gave them a couple of biffs and *habis perkara* [end of discussion] – that was the end of it. You had a choice: strike them or take it lying down and lose your prestige. And then be fired! A timid assistant was out of the race. There were, of course, exceptions among the older, more experienced and level-headed assistants, but most of them were rowdies or bullies who would strike if given the least excuse.... A gentle-minded assistant was considered a poor one. A *toean djahat* [a harsh, evil-tempered man, acting as a bully] curried favour with his superiors. (Prins 1958: 229)

The author gives a detailed account of the way the estate business was run, the daily work, the pecking order among the white staff of seniors and juniors, and the interaction with Asian foremen and coolies. However, Prins excels in his descriptions of the vulgarities that were part and parcel of the bachelor life which he shared with other expatriates: the loneliness in which these young men had to while away their leisure hours; the typical 'male' diversions, in which guns and hunting, beer swilling, dogs and horses played an important role; the absence of the slightest interest in reading and anything else that might have been considered 'cultural'; the horseplay at the club, playing cards and ending in a drunken orgy. And naturally there was the sexuality, with the *nyai* as an intimate but untrustworthy and despised companion: all this with no holds barred, the white junior managers competing with each other or sharing each other's 'property'. 'The Javanese "birds" [that is, women] did it for next to nothing, especially if her own *toean* had gone to Medan. The assistants were always prowling after each other's birds and slouched around the house like hungry wolves' (Prins 1958: 243).

Prins himself did not need a steady partner. When he desired a woman, he simply summoned a coolie girl, whether she was married or not. Readily available was the wife of the club boy on the plantation. He insists that both of them considered this an honour

> because a Javanese woman who has been with a *toean belanda* [Dutchman] climbed up a few rungs on the Javanese social ladder. It was a distinction.

> When a contingent of Javanese coolies arrived, the assistants did their utmost to palm me off with a young Javanese girl as a 'bird'. Sometimes these were girls of thirteen or fourteen. They were sexually mature, it was said. (Prins 1958: 243)

Non-conformism made Prins an acute and frank observer, but keeping himself on the right side of the colour divide, he was in his view of Asians precluded from dissociating himself from this white milieu of supremacy. Along with other 'Delianen', he thought of Chinese coolies as dogs, not people. It was only after he had left Sumatra, when reprimanded about this prejudice by some American fellow passengers on board the ship that took him to the United States, did he alter his view. Prins had indeed left the East Coast of Sumatra because he was afraid that had he remained there any longer he would have sunk down to the level at which the average European assistant ran his life. He arrived at this conclusion when noticing in himself symptoms which pointed to 'tropical madness', a feared ailment in his circle. He had difficulty in stifling sadistic tendencies which were vented by torturing pet animals and was shocked into awareness of this pastime when a planter colleague, his housemate, actually, seemed to display the same delusion. Prins was convinced that loneliness and the tropical climate had caused this aberration (Prins 1958: 300). Reaching this conclusion, he did not deviate from the prevailing notion about *Tropenkoller*, a mental breakdown said to affect only Europeans and caused by the lack of civilized life.

Racism as featured in colonial psychology

Tropical madness displayed symptoms first diagnosed by doctors who described this ailment as afflicting pioneering German colonists in Africa. It was found everywhere where young men from Western countries had to endure a tropical environment in the midst of African people. The singularity was that such symptoms occurred in people who in Europe were no different from their fellow citizens. Unrestrained behaviour was the generic name for a series of aberrations summed up by the colonial psychiatrist Jacob Kohlbrugge as follows: 'all acts of bestiality, sexual excesses, physical tortures and murders, plus bursts of delusions of grandeur' (1907: 167). This professional of the colonial psyche, both of the colonizer and of the colonized, sought the main cause of the derangement in the tropical climate and in the wayward behaviour of the autochthonous population.

> The loose clothing means that the shape of the body is accentuated, especially in the case with the natives. Nothing arouses passion so much as semi-nakedness, which lures thoughts in a certain direction and then allows the imagination free play. The result is that the *orang-baroe* [the newcomer] to the Indies ponders much more about the problems of sexuality than in Europe.... Another effect of the climate is that frequent bathing becomes the custom and here again glimpses of one's own naked body elicits the same response, in just such a fashion as an old-fashioned Dutch lady would have found taking a full bath more or less indecent; consequently again consciousness that others are doing the same kindles the imagination. Finally, the nature of the climate has created the custom of sleeping or drowsing through the warmest hours of the day: people disrobe, after first having enjoyed a copious meal, which speeds up the circulation of the blood. (Kohlbrugge 1907: 169-70)

Lurking behind this explanation of what was written up as a nervous breakdown appears to have been a class prejudice. Kohlbrugge was convinced that the self-discipline which was the overriding characteristic of middle-class behaviour in Europe was not practiced among whites who went overseas impaired with a proletarian background. This brand of expatriates were the ones who surrendered themselves to the temptations and plunged into excesses, which were revolting by the standards of the superior class to which the white segment automatically belonged in the colony. Nevertheless, only a tiny fraction of the Europeans succumbed to tropical madness. In contrast, the negative genetic qualities that Kohlbrugge ascribed to the Javanese population had nothing to do with illness but were determined by race. Among the characteristic components of the Javanese-Malay psyche, he listed unbridled imagination, limited mental capacity, prone to suggestibility, a lack of individualism, slavish submission, and slowness of thought (Kohlbrugge 1907: 29-50). Hence, while the autochthonous people were saddled with collective traits which cast doubt on their human development, Europeans only failed as individuals to the maintenance of social norms and values which were considered desirable or decent. What was stigmatized as behaviour to which Asians were prone was considered a deviation from the prescribed morality of the Europeans, for which both the tropical climate and the social environment could be held largely accountable. It is precisely this difference in explanation which reveals the racism permeated in the colonial situation. This verdict did not change over time. Immaturity, irrationality and impulsiveness were major traits which the *Encyclopædie van Nederlandsch-Indië* identified in its profile of the Javanese ethnicity (De

Graaff and Stibbe 1918: 215-16). While Europeans only failed as individuals to hold on to the norms and values which were considered desirable or decent, Asians were stigmatized as genetically prone to deviate from the prescribed morality. Precisely this difference in explanation reveals the racism permeating the colonized landscape.

It is against this background that the cruel behaviour meted out to the coolies on Sumatra's East Coast plantations should be understood. According to the received colonial wisdom, they – the 'scum' of Chinese and Javanese villages – had brought this brutal conduct upon themselves. Without the use of the stick or the whip their contractual obligations would not be realized. Admittedly, in disciplining this 'disorderly' and 'recalcitrant' workforce, some planters overstepped the mark and could not control themselves. Excessive harshness was of course deplorable, but sometimes it was simply unavoidable. However, instances of glaring outbursts of tropical madness should not be seized upon to blame all managers of the colonial project. In my deconstruction of the violence which occurred, I have rejected this explanation. A less biased judgement, confirmed by a flood of factual data, is that terrorizing the coolies was carried out systematically and that their brutal exploitation was accompanied by maximum oppression. Work-shy as they supposedly were, the only way to treat the contract labourers was to force them to do so with the use of violence. Flogging Asian workers with various degrees of severity had a dual purpose: punishing those who did not work properly, and, in order to prevent work-shyness, intimidating the rest. However, couching this explanation in economic terms does not suffice.[3] Violence resulting in temporary or permanent invalidity, sometimes even in the death, of the victim was a form of punishment which did not meet the dictates of managerial rationality. It would lead to the elimination or debilitation of a factor of production of which scarcity was the most salient feature. A close reading of Rhemrev's report makes quite clear that the cruelties perpetrated on coolies were far from being caused either by inefficiency or misbehaviour at their work. The nature of the 'offence' – committed in the economic sphere or outside of it – had little to do with the penalty meted out to them. The element of arbitrariness that overrode all others illustrated that they had been subjected to punishments of a purely discretionary character. The sheer hatred shown against people who had no resilience, who were utterly helpless, is mind boggling.

3 Speaking in more general terms, Memmi also emphasized that the daily humiliation of the colonized, their objective subjugation to the colonizer, could not be ascribed simply to economic considerations (Memmi 1966: 21).

Contempt, envy and fear of the 'native'

The brutalization of labour is the point of departure in an anthropological analysis of the atrocities committed by white rubber collectors-traders on Indians in the Amazon region during the first decades of the twentieth century. The hypothesis which Michael Taussig proposed is that more than being a means to force the indigenous population to work, violence became an end in itself. At the basis of the culture of terror described lay a mixture of contempt, envy and fear. The contempt was a logical by-product of the degradation to inferiority of the dominated race. The attitude which gave rise to this went far beyond the reduction of the underdog to the status of a mere commodity. At its root lay abomination. Ignoring the human quality of the other species by ascribing bestial behaviour to them, the atmosphere of violence this evoked was accompanied by a technique of torturing virtually to the point of death. The infliction of physical pain was also designed to torment the victim mentally, to rub in the fact that a farewell to life could take place at any random moment, beyond the control of the victim. The torture Taussig described also occurred on the plantation belt of Sumatra's East Coast: repeated immersions in water so that the victim almost drowned; protracted hanging up of Chinese coolies by their pigtails so that they dangled with their toes just touching the ground; denial of food and water until the victim lost consciousness; the flogging of coolies who were bound or crucified, along with other torments which would have made the advent of death a deliverance. The subaltern people, abominated as animals, got what they deserved, a bestial treatment.[4] The contempt was mixed with a good dose of envy, which revealed that the Asian coolies did not react spontaneously or willingly to 'sound economic impulses', and were free from an inner compulsion to perform waged labour. It was a form of escape that conjured up unbridled aggression in the white boss. The introduction in the Congo Free State of an exceptionally brutal regime of forced labour, as the Belgian periodical *Gazette Coloniale* explained, was also required in order not to undermine the morality of the working class at home:

> It is foolhardy to claim that the native should not be forced to provide his labour for the valorization of the country in which he lives. His unwillingness must not cause the non-utilization of the resources of that country.... Our own workers, who are forced to work for twelve hours or more each

4 Fanon deals extensively with the psychological damage also inflicted on the torturers in the colonial warfare by their practices (Fanon 1968: 177-214).

> day on penalty of starvation, would find it very strange if they should accidentally learn of the absurd protection that some people would provide to the natives of the Congo. The law of work applies to the blacks as well as to ourselves. If they think they do not have to submit to it, we have the right and even the duty to do so. (Quoted in Delathuy 1985: 57-58)

The rationale given in this quotation was an early formulation of the *mise en valeur* thesis coined by the social-democratic French politician Albert Sarraut in an attempt to justify and prolong colonial rule as the harbinger of enlightenment and modernity. The deeper motive, which I think Taussig rightly emphasized, was fear of the oppressed and conquered. In Brazil, the fear turned against the secret power that emanated from the natural environment and with which the indigenous population was very strongly bound up. The planters in Deli tended to be intimidated by the social climate which they had created, one in which they found themselves drowning. In his diary written towards the end of the nineteenth century, alluded to earlier, the plantation doctor Tschudnowsky draws attention, in a great number of telling details, to the hate which most planters nurtured for their coolies. His shocking account is a decisive refutation of the myth of the patriarchal management style which was supposed to have characterized early plantation life. Knowing they were surrounded by a sea of 'yellow mugs', an 'unfathomable mass of coolies', led to nightmares and forms of madness which the white masters tried to suppress with terror.

What interpretation should be put on an instance described by Rhemrev of a Javanese woman whom a planter had first flogged to death and *only then* hanged? Given the impossibility of raising the labour force to a higher level of civilization, every contact was pregnant with the risk that the planters could lower themselves to the same degree of primitiveness that characterized the nature and being of the coolies. In these circumstances violence assumed the function of creating the necessary distance. The Asian middlemen who served the employers – overseers and other agents – were given the task of surveillance, collecting information about what went on among the coolies in the fields and in the barracks. They fostered the fear of their employers by reporting on agitation, bad faith, disobedience, sabotage, conspiracies and the like. They confirmed their own indispensability through such stories and gave the planters an opportunity to find a safety valve for their feelings of doom, which were part real, part fiction. Tapping this mood, Taussig noted:

> [T]he colonists and rubber company employees not only feared but themselves created through narration fearful and confusing images of savagery,

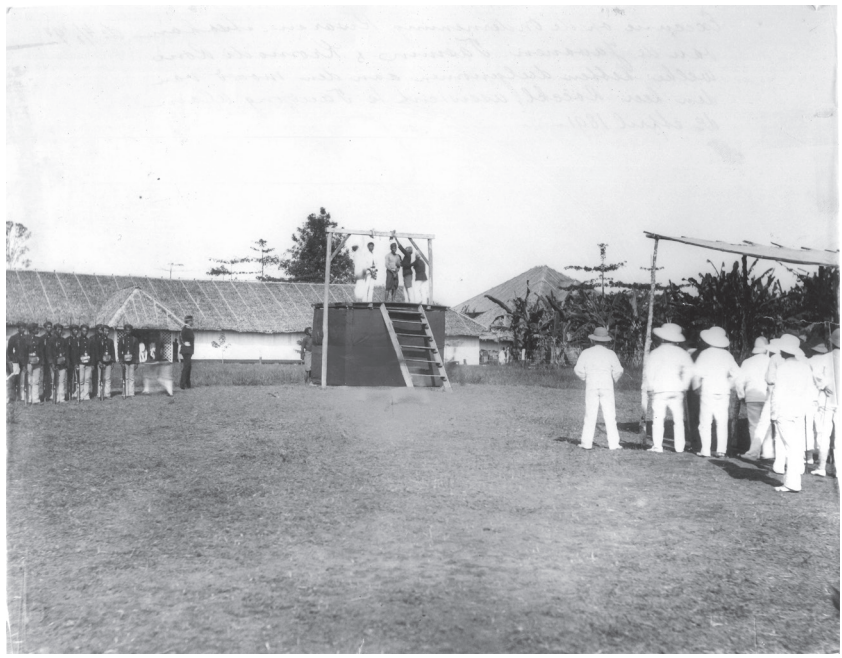

Figure 3.2. Execution at the company Kisaran in Asahan on 4 January 1893 of the Javanese Tasmin and Kromo di Rono for their participation in the murder of Roeckl, assistant at Tandjong Alam in April 1891. Source: photo collection of Jan Breman. ⏎

> images that bound colonial society together through the epistemic murk of the space of death. The terror and torture they devised mirrored the horror of savagery they both feared and fictionalized. (Taussig 1987: 133)

The public staging of violence and torture

By refusing to bridle their hegemonic power, the planters succeeded in overcoming their fear. Individualized behaviour, which remained concealed, and public displays were part and parcel of the arsenal of coercive instruments at hand to keep the coolies under control. The photograph shown in Figure 3.2 visualizes the execution of the death penalty which was carried out in the early days of 1893. The portrait shows two Javanese on a scaffold with their wrists manacled. Beside them stand the executioner and his helper who are busy putting the nooses around their necks. To one side of the scaffold members of the colonial police force are lined up under the command of a Dutch officer and in the background coolie barracks can be seen. The photographer of the theatre positioned himself in the vicinity of a small group

of whites, planters and civil servants who are looking on from fairly close by. Pith helmets and a canopy, the latter like the scaffold built specially for the occasion, shelter them from the fierce sun. Equipped with a stick, hands at their sides, in the pockets, or clasped behind their backs, they exude power and superiority. A follow-up photograph is pretty much identical to the first and must have been taken barely a minute later. The change of décor which hits the eye is that the two Javanese are now dangling from the gallows. According to a brief text on the back of the photograph, this drama was the carrying out of the death sentence passed on Tasmin and Kromo di Rono for their participation in the murder in April 1891 of a white staff member on the plantation Tandjong Alam. The way in which the role of the various actors in the colonial mise en scène is portrayed could not have been more clearly expressed. A highly significant detail is that the execution was not carried out in the prison or in some other public space, but on the plantation.[5]

The excesses which occurred were not aberrations restricted to a few sadistic planters, but were firmly linked to the work regime of the agro-industry. Nor were they confined to the outer provinces of the Netherlands Indies. What has struck me as I went through the literature available on plantation and mining enclaves in French or British colonial Asia is the similarity in the technique of torture. The marking of the 'work cattle' with branding irons to facilitate their retrieval in case of escape, the smearing of the genitalia of female coolies with red chillies before they were bound in a crucified position on a pole in front of or under the bungalow of the estate manager were not confined to Sumatra but also took place in British and French colonies of Asia, such as Assam and Cochinchina (Breman 1990: chs. 4 and 7). The case quoted by Rhemrev of a sick woman who was subjected to electric shocks which completely disrupted her bladder and intestines, was not an exceptional one. On the tea gardens in Assam the same punishment was meted out to recalcitrant coolies and witnessed in front of the assembled workforce. With the passing of time, the tensions to which Deli's plantation management of seniors and juniors were exposed transformed into a feeling of insecurity bordering on hysteria. The annual publication of statistics of attacks on white field supervisors by coolies, which began in the first decade of the twentieth century, only served to feed the fear and led to accusations levelled at the labour inspectorate for having turned the heads of Asian workers in revolt even more (Hanegraaff 1910). Contempt and fear coupled

5 Both photographs are published as frontispiece in the third and revised Dutch edition (1992) and also in the English, Chinese and Bahasa Indonesia edition of my book, respectively, in 1989, 1992 and 1997.

with rage about the intemperate *amuk* behaviour ascribed to the Asian labourer reinforced the climate of racism which permeated the 'frontier' society of East Sumatra. And this did not come to an end when the world outside finally came to know about the 'coolie scandal'.

I reject the argumentation that what happened in this frontier region remained confined to it and was either the outcome of inadequate supervision by an understaffed civil service or was engendered by the unclear line drawn between public governance and private authority. After all, the colonial situation which provided the breeding ground for white superiority over brown inferiority continued to exist. It was the basis on which the government held society in check. The rules of the game to be observed in contacts across the colour barrier were meticulously regulated and any 'unseemly behaviour' by newcomers was immediately corrected. Shortly after the establishment of the Labour Inspectorate agency – with a mandate restricted to the East Coast of Sumatra – an assistant inspector wrote to his superior that he had been compelled to reprimand the newly appointed Chinese interpreter for his impertinence. 'Recently I caught him shaking hands when greeting Europeans on an estate. I have strictly forbidden him this gesture of frankness' (Bijleveld 1904). Avoidance of all contact which might give rise to a claim to equality certainly did not go far enough in the case of the ordinary coolie. Without excessive display of subjugation in the presence of a white face – squatting, doffing headgear, remaining silent with downcast eyes and the like – they risked punishment. While my critics are inclined to relate abusive practices to extraordinary circumstances that occurred only in newly opened up regions of the archipelago which were still beyond the pacifying reach of the state, I would like to stand by my thesis put forward in the book that the violence-ridden encounter between coolie and planter was an excessive, an ideal-typical variant in the Weberian sense of the subjugation of labour in Indonesia under Dutch rule. Also elsewhere in the archipelago and right up to the end, the workforce was subjected to physical force. To give a fairly arbitrary example of this, a survey among mill hands in the city of Surabaya conducted in 1926 showed that they thought that hitting and kicking them were all part of the normal display of industrial management. The excuse given by their bosses for these abuses was the inferior quality of the workforce (Vreede 1926: 15-16).

Demarcating the racial divide

Perhaps more than ever before, the feelings of hate and contempt felt for the conquered race were expressed with utmost derision when the precursors of

the nationalist movement began to articulate an Indonesian consciousness in the early twentieth century. No matter how carefully they trod at first, insistence on their own identity and the inherent set of values came down to a repudiation of the ideological supremacy claimed by the rulers. This caused the greatest possible ire in the expatriate milieu well accustomed to speak mainly in pejorative terms of 'the natives'. The small avant-garde in their midst which unrepentantly confessed to sentiments of an 'ethical policy' – with at the very least the assumption of progress through education and more generally subscribing to the pledge to civilize indigenous society – were seen by most Europeans in the hegemonic conduit as little short of provocative. A fine illustration of the prevalent climate is a discussion waged in some of the most authoritative newspapers in the Netherlands Indies between late 1910 and early 1911.[6] The first shot was fired in an article by a well-known Indies playwright, who claimed that the measures taken in previous years to protect the plantation coolies against abuses had soured a sound work regime. It was not by legislation, the writer argued, that the 'Deli coolie-beasts' would be transformed into human beings. People who stood so low on the ladder of civilization had to be disciplined by the cudgel and there was no help for it but to maintain this form of punishment on a large and systematic scale. The wholesome fear of those in command which used to exist had disappeared and consequently coolie resistance had begun to spring up everywhere.

> We are now at a stage at which the *singkeh* [newcomer] in Deli dares to lift his insolent face to that of his master; and this is no longer just the volatile Madurese, against whom the planters in Java have stood firm – but also the Javanese, the gentle, submissive Javanese has now begun to raise his head! Still only very sporadically and not demonstratively rudely, but it has begun! (Fabricius 1910)

This article elicited a host of reactions of which the first one and exceptionally so, roundly condemned it. An official in the colonial civil service in Java wrote to say he was shocked by the diatribe. He drew attention to the maltreatment of workers on the sugar estates which were standard fare in many districts throughout the island without incurring any legal consequences. There were abuses galore in Java about which no one ever bothered to make enquiries. His letter of protest specified one case with

6 Mainly in the daily newspapers *Locomotief* and *Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië* between October-November 1910 and May 2011.

which he was personally acquainted. It concerned an administrator of a sugar plantation who used to beat up and kick around his workforce. He did this not just for putative or real transgressions in the work sphere, but also when he thought the Javanese concerned did not show him profuse submission and respect as a *toean besar* (European boss). When the judge presiding over the court trial against this administrator had asked him if he would treat workers in the Netherlands the same way, he replied that it was a completely different matter to beat a white worker rather than a Javanese. The defendant escaped with the smallest possible fine, whereas in contrast, for far less severe infringements, coolies tended to be given harsh penalties. The fact that this case had been filed in court was because of the coincidental arrival of a new civil servant who in his innocence undertook these legal proceedings on his own initiative. The Javanese workmen who were cross-examined by the prosecuting official had displayed the greatest astonishment. They explained the lack of any official sanction up to that point as the result of their long-standing experience that maltreatment of ordinary workers was not considered a crime. The letter writer wished to lodge a protest about the way such matters were handled. He was utterly against bringing back corporal punishment as advocated at the start of the vitriolic debate. Callous treatment could only lead to embitterment and racial hatred.

His comments met with little approval. The general opinion held was that the growing insolence of the coolies had to be met with the use of the rattan cane. Misbehaviour, a Deli planter wrote, had to be instantly punished because filing an official complaint did not solve the problem. A well-known columnist threw himself into the debate with vigour. Scornfully he spoke of 'Javanophiles', among whom he included all those who took the side of the 'so-called victims'. He was convinced that there could be no legal notion of equality. Hitting a Javanese was indeed something entirely different from doing the same to a white person. He condemned everything which hinted at the Ethical Policy and was not prepared to listen to any talk of education for self-rule. He declared the 'moral advancement' of the people, a goal strongly embraced by all those who put their faith in a civilizing mission, utter nonsense. In his eyes an educated 'native' was a suspect person, whose danger and antipathy increased the more he had learned. This man argued that the small minority of Europeans could only maintain themselves in the colony by acting firmly. 'If we want to remain here, we have to continue to be the boss. If we wish to be respected as masters, we have to behave as masters' (Wijbrands 1910, November 15). Unadulterated racism made him qualify a coolie in Deli not as a workman but as a human animal.

Following naturally in this line of thought, calls were raised to replace the labour inspectors on the East Coast of Sumatra with plantation police, a corps that would be led by ex-army officers. This was the only way to put a check on the attacks on white assistants which nowadays occurred with great regularity and not infrequently led to the death of hardworking, virtuous young European men. Carefully worded reports in the wake of recent incidents, stating that in the past few years, abuses against coolies had increased rather than decreased and that the latter were only trying to defend themselves against the inhuman treatment to which they were exposed, made little impact. The same fate befell the intervention of a Javanese *regent* (district head), who began by admitting that the coolies on the plantations belonged to the dregs of rural society but then went on to say that the whole population could not be tarred with the same brush (Koesomo 1910). He advocated bridging the gap between both races and expressed his gratitude to the proponents of the upliftment policy which would create harmony between the rulers and the ruled. Such radical counsel – acceptance of white coaching on the road to brown progress – was given short thrift among diehards in the colonial climate at the time. In answer the question of whether there was the slightest aptitude for civilization present among the people, a negative reply followed. This lofty objective was completely out of the question. Continuance of Dutch authority stood and fell by readiness to inspire fear. The punitive planter's stick, used to discipline grudging and impudent labourers, should not be mentioned in the same breath as the agricultural tool brandished by the subservient Asian on the plantations as a weapon of resistance against his white better. Double standards were even absolutely commendable, especially because how else could one single European stand up to a hundred coolies? Racialized inequality was inherent in administrative practice and protests that arose against white prerogatives from the colonized society were drastically stifled.

Nearly two decades after the atrocities committed against coolies were put on public record by Tan Malaka, one of Indonesia's most prominent freedom fighters, returned to Indonesia in 1919. Having completed a teachers' training college in the Netherlands, he was engaged as a teacher in a Deli plantation school, the only one in the region. After two years, however, he lost the patronage and protection he had enjoyed from the owner of the estate, an unusual figure among the planters. He was thus driven away from the first job he had held on his return to Indonesia (Tan Malaka in Jarvis 1991: 47-50).

Tan Malaka gave voice to the ordeal of the coolie workforce in the midst of whom he lived for two years:

> The class which toils from dawn to dusk; the class which earns a wage just sufficient to fill the belly and cover its nakedness; the class which lives in a shed like goats in a stable; and is arbitrarily flogged and sworn at and damned to hell; the class which could at any time lose wife or daughter should the white boss lust after her.... [T]hat is the class of Indonesians known as contract coolies. (Tan Malaka 1947: 47-48)

The colonial scandal of plantation labour had been a continuing story. The Netherlands Indies were not exceptional in the brutalization of the coolie. In British India the connotation of the term, which originally meant payment for a day's work, had become so derogatory that after independence the government of India prohibited the usage of the word in official documents (see Breman and Daniel 1992).

My primary reason for writing this essay has been to remind readers that the abuses which Rhemrev as official in the colonial judiciary revealed in 1903 in his undisclosed report were never effectively repressed. Secondly, to point out that accounts about the continuation of these abuses in the years which followed were, as they had always been, taken merely as casual incidents. And thirdly, to construct a hypothesis stating that in the search for an explanation of the terror to which the workforce was subjected, an analysis only targeting the management of plantation business does not go far enough. To gain insight to what happened then and there requires a broader frame of interpretation. The 'coolie scandal' which blew up in the early the twentieth century on Sumatra's East Coast is incomprehensible without paying heed to the colonial situation in toto. Racialized inequality was inherent policy practice and protests that arose from the colonized society against white prerogatives were drastically stifled. The atrocities committed in Deli's plantation belt and their handling by the government in hand-and-glove collaboration with corporate business but also in the way these criminal events resonated in a setting founded on apartheid, shed light on the structure and culture of Dutch colonialism as it had evolved in the Indonesian archipelago.

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4 Coolie Labour and Colonial Capitalism in Asia

> We all live by robbing Asiatic coolies, and those of us who are 'enlightened' all maintain that those coolies ought to be set free; but our standard of living, and hence our 'enlightenment', demands that the robbery shall continue.
> – George Orwell, 'Rudyard Kipling' (1942)

Introduction

Karl Polanyi's seminal treatise *The Great Transformation* (1944) described and analysed the switch from an agrarian-rural to an industrial-urban way of life in the North Atlantic Basin around the middle of the nineteenth century. This turning tide had initially worsened the plight of the workforce but subsequently gave rise to a standard labour contract and climaxed in the welfare state during the first three-quarters of the twentieth century (Breman and Van der Linden 2014). The conclusion discerned from this development was that capitalism did not merely facilitate but had fostered social equality and political democracy as the hallmark of society's fabric of modernity. Around the middle of the same century a similar transformation was construed for the people and countries in the decolonized Global South, which in the age of imperialism had remained stuck in stagnation. The developmental paradigm promoted suggested that having fought free from colonial rule would enable them to follow the pathway paved by the frontrunners and slowly catch up with the advanced nation states. This scenario of developmentalism is flawed as it fails to take into consideration the rupture between the Global North and the Global South. It was a divergence effectuated by the differentiated intrusion and impact of capitalism already in the colonial era.

This chapter is concerned with aspects of sourcing coolies far and wide and confined labour relations in Asia from colonialism until today. It is restricted to the workforce, which, after the prohibition of slavery from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, was sourced in India, China and Indonesia for deployment to the capitalist plantations and mines elsewhere in the Global South. On reaching these work sites in Malaya, Sumatra, Mauritius, South Africa, Fiji, Cuba, Peru, Guyana, Suriname or the Caribbean islands, the huge army of coolies was put to work in commodified

captivity. A 'new system of slavery' was how Hugh Tinker classified the terms of the contract, which they had thumbprinted on departure to their alien destination (Tinker 1974).

'Dualistic economies' is the term that was coined to characterize the split that segregated the Indonesian peasantry from the inroads of Western capitalism and its expatriate management (Boeke 1953). The idea of an institutional divide between economic theory and praxis of Western and Eastern humanity would also resonate in the model of economic development with unlimited supplies of labour (Lewis 1954). The presentation of socio-economic dualism as a dichotomy would a few decades later be reiterated in the distinction made between a formal and an informal sector of the economy. While in my work I did accept the intrusion of an enclave type of capitalism from the Global North in the colonized territories of the Global South, I rejected the claim of a cleavage between circuits separated from each other. The research I conducted on coolie labour employed in large-scale and capitalist plantation and mining industries in late-colonial Indonesia attested to their interdependency. However, in contrast to the penetration of capitalism in the peasant economies of the Global North one century earlier, the social question was prevented from being posed under colonial domination. Instead, the sizable coolie workforce remained condemned to undiluted exploitation and oppression (see also Damir-Geilsdorf et al. 2017).

The trafficking of a footloose workforce held captive

My research on coolie labour dates back to the early 1970s when I started to investigate the emergence of a capitalist plantation and mining belt on Sumatra's East Coast in late-colonial Indonesia. Translated from the original Dutch edition, the monograph published in 1989 was entitled *Taming the Coolie Beast: Plantation Society and the Colonial Order in Southeast Asia* (Breman 1989).[1] The contents discussed the colonization of waste land for growing cash crops on large estates in a thinly populated and unsettled part of the Dutch-occupied archipelago in maritime Southeast Asia since the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The commodities produced – tobacco

1 Translated from the first Dutch edition, *Koelies, planters en koloniale politiek: Het arbeidsregime op de grootlandbouwondernemingen aan Sumatra's Oostkust in het begin van de twintigste eeuw* (Dordrecht 1987; 3rd and rev. ed., KITLV, Leiden, 1992). The Chinese edition, translated by Li Minghuan, was published in 1992 by Lijiang Press in Xiamen. The Bahasa Indonesia edition, *Menjinakkan Sang Kuli: Politik Kolonial pada Awal Abad Ke-20*, was translated by Koesalah Soebagyo Toer and published by Pustaka Utama Grafiti, Jakarta, in 1997.

and rubber initially – were exported for sale in the expanding world market. Labour in the region was in scarce supply and the people living in this jungle-covered habitat in their tribal mode of existence were found unwilling as well as deemed unsuitable to be engaged for waged work. Similar issues arose for digging tin in open pit mines on islands situated in-between Sumatra and Singapore or cutting timber along Sumatra's coastal tracks. The vast workforce needed for cultivation, mining, logging and processing the output was sourced from outside as temporary contract labourers.

In the beginning, they predominantly hailed from the Straits Settlements or China and subsequently and increasingly from Java. In close collusion with the European owners and managers of plantation and mining capital, the colonial government introduced labour legislation, which allowed the pioneers of these large-scale agro-industrial enterprises to include penal sanctions in the contract which forced the coolies to comply with the harsh and oppressive work regime. Employers not only enjoyed total freedom of action in how to deal with their workforce but could also count on the sympathy and cooperation of officials, police and judiciary in maltreating and terrorizing coolies, legally and illegally. Justice was subordinate to the maintenance of authority and order. A coolie ordinance came into effect in 1880 and was further sharpened at the behest of the employers' lobby in 1889 and 1898.

Debt bondage was the mechanism through which the coolies were locked up at the worksite for two to three years on the pretext that coolies were a rabble from the lowest rungs of the Asian peasantry. It meant that indenture now also dispossessed them of control over when, where, and to whom to sell their labour power. Conditioning by coercion was to render the recruited workforce suitable for employment in the capitalist sector. According to this perception, they lacked the required self-restraint and were therefore unfit to work properly in a commercialized economy under capitalist incentives. The harsh regimentation purported to be in the interest of the coolies themselves, who were now trained how to become useful and disciplined workers. It was a justification of naked power abuse which expressed the undiluted racist character of both colonial governance and colonial capitalism (Breman 2021).

The contract the coolies were made to sign, usually by fingerprint, was sealed with payment of a small amount, which the recruit was supposed to receive but frequently did not. To this trifle sum of advance payment, the much higher cost of lodging-cum-boarding and overseas transport was added together with the commission fee extracted by the *comprador* as the contracting agent. This grand total was the debt – around the turn of the

Figure 4.1. Bounty hunters from among the Batak peasantry in the region roamed around in search of runaway coolies to bring them back to the enterprise to which they were indentured. Photo by Kristen Feilberg. Source: Wereldmuseum Amsterdam.

century ranging from about 50 to 100 Straits Settlements dollars – for which the coolie was sold. It was a debt which he had to work off to qualify for redemption, an obligation ridden with arbitrary and compulsive stipulations which most coolies failed to meet. At the end of the contracted period the large majority actually found themselves much more indebted than the amount for which they had lost their freedom. They were thus compelled to renew their indenture, often again and again, running up to a working lifetime duration under expatriate bosses. In many ways, the workforce recruited and employed under duress resembled the chattel enslavement of an earlier era and which had been similarly organized. To share my research theme with non-metropolitan scholarship, I arranged for a translation of my findings on the indentured experience in Deli residency into Chinese and Bahasa Indonesia in 1992 and 1997, respectively.

I followed up on my case study on coolie labour with the publication a few years later of a much shorter treatise on labour mobility and mobilization in colonial Asia, highlighting the pivotal role of the government in labour regulation (Breman 1990). I pointed out that displacement of labour from the peasant economy was not an end in itself. It aimed at creating a situation in which disciplined command over the workforce employed by capitalist enterprises could be secured.

A further justification for the crucial need of a regulated rhythm was found in the allegedly poor mettle of the contracted coolies. By representing the migrants as the worst and weakest in society, human refuse for

whom there was no place in village life, and by suggesting moreover that they formed an amoral and half-criminal element in society, the use of compulsion to regiment this selection of the socially negative became not only acceptable but even desirable (Breman 1990: 41).

Depending on time and place, the policy objective lay just as much on immobilizing labour on arrival at the worksite as on pressure on labour to become mobile at the point of departure. The procurement of labour used to be mediated by brokers and their touts classified as agents (or *compradors*, in colonial parlance).

Another migratory stream, different in origin from the one on which I focused and which I only briefly referred to, came from those classes of the peasantry that were not impoverished, or were less impoverished. These somewhat better-off migrants were equipped with more social and sometimes also physical capital. They managed to establish themselves abroad as self-employed craftsmen or in petty business as merchants, shopkeepers, moneylenders, clerks in commercial firms, or as low-ranking officials. Their specific function was to operate as a social buffer between the white elite of rulers and employers on the one side and on the other the mass of the autochthonous population. Much of the literature on labour migration is handicapped by an urban bias which is to a large extent of postcolonial vintage. This dominant view was based on the idea that labour, rendered superfluous in the prime sector of the economy, moved out in search of livelihood to urban growth poles. In contrast to this presumption, I am inclined to emphasize the persistently intra-rural character of colonial labour migration. The realms of metropolitan capitalism remained predominantly tied to non-urban locations.

Finally, the incessant flow of labour back and forth was a distinct feature of the relationship connecting growth poles and hinterland. As long as the new and exploitative mode of production tended to be concentrated in enclaves, circulation rather than migration dictated the pattern of labour mobility. The postulation of diversity in our lens on Asian societies and economies should not ignore the similarities which are a hallmark of our theme of study: the formation of a coolie workforce. In spite of the many differences between societies and their economies, 'the volume of migrant labour is not something to be taken as given but is created and recreated by the [colonial] state' (Burawoy 1980: 163).

The regulation of labour relations in the enclaves of capitalist production was achieved by a close and very effective but carefully covered up coalition between colonial administration and private business. Both benefited by the severe regimentation of the imported workforce. The owners and managers of metropolitan capital forcefully resisted the introduction of a fair wage

and decent conditions of employment while the colonial state wanted to ward off political unrest. To overstate the unique configuration of factors in each separate country would be detrimental to our comprehension of more general regularities beyond state boundaries caused by common dynamics. The incorporation of the South, Southeast and East Asian subcontinents in the globalized market was structured by metropolitan capitalism and accelerated in the late-colonial epoch. This widening contextualization shows striking similarities in the patterns and mechanisms of labour caught up in bonded attachment.

Cooliehood from China dispatched to the Nanyang

Gregor Benton describes and analyses in a new study the Chinese workforce contracted for employment in the Nanyang during the first half of the twentieth century. *Chinese Indentured Labour in the Dutch East Indies, 1880-1942* (2022) is a most welcome contribution to the literature on how after the formal abolition of slavery capitalism insisted on its continuing use of coercion to cheapen and weaken labour in the countries of the Global South oppressed under imperialist domination. The abysmally low wage rate fell short of providing sufficient income for basic needs, resulting in staggering indebtedness and re-indentured bondage to the worksite. Detachment of labourers from home and kin and locking them up in faraway destinations with an alien social, economic and cultural fabric enabled employers to impose conditions which thoroughly commodified workers and denied their human quality. Benton's monograph covers in detail the recruitment and passage from the coast of South China and their work and livelihood on arrival in Sumatra in the then Dutch East Indies. The main text spread over six chapters adds up to an apt profile of cooliehood. This umbrella concept is meant to signify 'a rigid caste-determined fixity, a point of no return that permanently placed disenfranchised workers within the gridlock of their subaltern status' (Mehta 2004: 54).

My comments concern the goldmine of empirical data included in two appendices of Benton's book, which inform the reader of the appalling reality of coolie work and life. The first appendix consists of a set of interviews taken in 1963 by a team of social scientists from Xiamen University collated as 'The Heart-Rending Story of Indentured Chinese Labour: Report on an Investigation of Forty-four Coolies Who Worked on Plantations on Former East Sumatra and Tin Mines on Bangka' (Liu Yuzun et al. 2016). The second supplement is an elaborate record written by an inspector of the colonial Labour Office and reveals the dismal treatment and atrocities to which indentured Chinese

labourers were subjected since the last quarter of the nineteenth century (Pastor 1927). They had been enslaved on arrival in *panglongs* (logging camps) and sawmills along the East Coast of Sumatra. Most of the abusers in the case of these workers and most of the *panglong* owners and managers were themselves Chinese instead of white expatriates. My following notes and observations have both appendices as their point of departure and concentrate on the substance detailed in both well-chosen sources.

Why were Chinese labourers willing to leave home and enter contracts which brought them to unknown and unfamiliar worksites in faraway destinations? 'The Making of a Coolie," an essay which I co-authored with E.V. Daniel in 1992, discusses how in a process of proletarianization labour brokers corralled and contracted impoverished peasants and tradesmen. They were sold and commodified as 'piglets' for detained employment in capitalist enclaves set up in colonial empires (Breman and Daniel 1992). Rampant landlordism in combination with usurious moneylending had dispossessed a substantial part of the peasantry from colonized or semi-colonized Asia from all or nearly all agrarian property. The intrusion of capitalism in this landscape had produced a sizable class of agricultural labourers, dependent on the sale of their labour power to owners of land higher up in the peasant hierarchy. Slightly above the totally landless households had emerged a land-poor class of cultivators with holdings too small to provide work and income enough for all members of their households.

Coolies were recruited from this swelling footloose bottom of the peasant economy, sometimes in the villages where they lived but most had already cut loose from their homesteads. They were adrift in the countryside, as vagabonds in search of daily livelihood along the main roads, by river crossings, at shifting markets, in centres of pilgrimage, or places where people gathered for religious festivals. Others had made their way to towns and ports along the coast. In his classic study on land and labour in China, Tawney indicated the wayward existence of precisely this category of labourers who quit the rural hinterland but never entered urban factories.

> Little, however can be said to this floating population of casual workers, for little is known about it. The problem of factory labour in China is grave, but at present it is small compared with that of the coolie. It is surprising that, while so much attention is rightly concentrated on the first, so little that is of value has been written on the second. (Tawney 1932: 120-21)

Tinker specified the vulnerability of this vagrant contingent in India, torn loose from their habitat of origin and adrift between sectors of casual work.

They were part of a rapidly growing reserve army of labour captured by touts of labour brokers in their role as agents of capitalist enterprises run by expatriate management.

> They often took the people who were already available in the ports of embarkation, Calcutta, Madras and Bombay. They were the flotsam of humanity, drawn to the big city by the prospect of employment which had vanished and left them stranded.... The great majority, however were simple country folk who had been attracted to the big city in search of casual work as burden carriers, coolies in the basic sense. (Tinker 1974: 51)

Loneliness signalling individuation and alienation

What impressed me reading through the collection of interviews with Chinese coolies who managed to return to where they came from was the ordeal of loneliness as a pervasive and sustained feature of the tales they told on their sojourn. All fresh recruits were males, young adults or nearly so. Females were not supposed to be part of the coolie workforce but instead stayed home waiting for the return of the menfolk. In contrast to the better-off emigrants, very few of the coolies were already married on departure. They usually had arranged for their wedding shortly before with the specific purpose to leave behind their wives as grass widows to take care of ageing parents. The migrants did not depart with the idea of settling down in the Nanyang but aimed to return when they would have worked off their contract. However, well into the first decades of the twentieth century the large majority of them failed to reach China's shore again. Ties with home were already broken on departure and rarely repaired on eventual return. The mortality rate was excruciatingly high, not only because of the harsh and hazardous toil but also due to poor healthcare and maltreatment. Coolies accused of misbehaviour sometimes did not survive the gruesome penalties meted out to them. Others, unable to endure the brutal treatment, committed suicide. Illness was not tolerated as a reason for absence from duty and medical care not at all or badly provided. Food was of deficient quality and so was accommodation.

The workforce was split up in labour gangs under a Chinese overseer with work tasks individually allotted and wages paid on piece rate. The gangs were sheltered in barracks but, worn out from the working day of twelve hours or more, their members stayed aloof from each other rather than caring for shared companionship. Many sought relief from fiendish

reality in addiction to opium, the distribution of which was legalized by the colonial government. Sexuality is not a subject often raised in the literature on coolie labour. How did these huge army of young males cope with the absence of female partners? Some of them on payday visited brothels in the nearby town or their gang boss arranged for prostitutes to come to the barracks and service in turn their inmates willing to share the cost. For lack of income most workers did avail themselves of this opportunity only occasionally rather than frequently. Sodomy was more commonly practiced, fresh recruits on the worksite being appropriated for this form of sexual intercourse by old hands with the overseer having the first pick.

Female coolies were not exempted from employment in all colonized territories. The British Colonial Office stipulated already in 1868 that every shipload of coolies should consist of at least of 40 per cent women. It was a regulation prescribed more out of concern for tensions arising among a totally male workforce than out of abhorrence of homosexuality. In striking contrast to what remained for long an immoral and criminal offence in the Dutch metropole and among white expatriates in the East Indies, callous indifference fitted the racist invoked bestiality ascribed to the coolie workforce.

Ethnic diversity and the racialized preference of employers

Conditions of coolie work and life slowly started to improve in the course of the twentieth century although cursing, beating and kicking the workforce to instil discipline continued as before. Willing to toil ceaselessly to work off their debt, a growing proportion also avoided gambling away their meagre pay or spending it on prostitutes and opium. At the end of their bonded employment they managed to dodge the pressure employers exerted to lure these old and trained hands into a renewed contract for three years. With the increased cultivation of other cash crops – at first rubber and later on also oil palm next to tobacco – a different and steadily growing coolie workforce was imported from Java. It was a policy of ethnic diversification to which capitalist employers resorted to fragment the labouring multitude they needed.

> The Indians served on the plantations in Ceylon, Assam and Malaya, and to a lesser extent as peasant colonizers in Burma. The Chinese worked in mines and plantations in Malaya, and both the Chinese and Javanese worked on the estates of outer Indonesia. But even more important, the Chinese and Indians provided the labour for the auxiliary and service industries of the new areas. The Chinese worked in the rice mills of Thailand and Burma,

> the rubber factories of Malaya and Indo-China and the sugar factories of Java. Both Indians and Chinese manned the ports, road transport systems and urban construction industries throughout the region. (Baker 1981: 336)

Occupational distribution did not stop at the level of nationalities but was further specified in ethnic differentiation at the regional level. As, for instance, exemplified by a decisive preference for the South Indian coolie on the plantations of Malaya.

> Particularly the Untouchable low-caste Madrasi was considered the most satisfactory type of labour, especially for light, simple, repetitive tasks. He was malleable, worked well under supervision and was easily manageable. He was not as ambitious as most of his Northern Indian compatriots and certainly nothing like the Chinese. True, he had little of the self-reliance or the capacity of the Chinese, or for that matter of many of his own countrymen from other parts of the Subcontinent, but he was the most amenable to the comparatively lowly-paid and rather regimented life of estates and government departments.... Moreover, he was already adjusted to a low standard of living, was a British subject accustomed to British rule and well-behaved and docile. (Sandhu 1969: 65)

In the plantation belt of East Sumatra Chinese coolies stood in good stead as better and more diligent cultivators but were blamed for their recalcitrant temper. The preference of planters had shifted to Javanese workers who were considered to be less industrious but more docile and pliable.

A larger number of Chinese coolies succeeded in redeeming themselves from indebtedness and were able to get permission to leave the worksite. A fraction of them, free at last but as dispossessed as they were on arrival, settled down in their bachelor existence as daily wage earners or set up in self-employment some minor business ventures in the region. A growing contingent had saved up enough to pay for the fare of the passage back to China. What had been a trickle became a flood with the wholesale dismissal of coolies during the worldwide economic crisis in the early 1930s, which also had badly hit the capitalist enterprises on Sumatra's East Coast. Many of the interviews with returned coolies in the collection compiled in the first appendix of Benton's book relate to this wave of repatriation which accelerated in the late 1940s, to fizzle out only in the next decade. Some of them had experienced debt bondage not for one or two contract periods but for twenty or thirty years, not seldom until the end of their working life. Were they reabsorbed where they came from?

> [M]ost of those who 'returned' to their 'community' and 'homeland' discovered that they were not 'peasants' but only coolies who had given up their chance of becoming peasants again. They remained what they were: coolies. 'Sucked oranges' was the epithet given to the returned migrants from the Malaysian plantations in the villages of Tamil Nadu. Of the repatriates in Southern India among whom Daniel carried out field research, there were indeed exceptions. These were mainly members of upper-castes and the progeny of labour recruiters who had, over several generations, acquired wealth and property in Malaysia and Sri Lanka. And even of these individuals, the derogatory aspersion 'coolie' is whispered by those who had never migrated. But most of those who returned to their imagined villages returned to earning their living as coolies. (Breman and Daniel 1992: 278; see also Breman 1990: 54)

In China, too, return from abroad did not lead to resettlement in the place of origin. In 1992 and again in 2001 I made research trips to Shantou, Xiamen, Quanzhou and Fujian, ports in Guangdong province, to visit depots where coolie recruits who had signed the contract were detained, waiting for the journey by boat to the Nanyang. This trafficking business went on in other localities along the coast as well and I made excursions to these stores where commodified young males were held captive. In Shantou, I met with a team of historians from the local university who were engaged in research on coolies repatriates, most of whom had remained adrift. In the course of their investigations they had come across a man thoroughly traumatized by the agony he had experienced in Southeast Asia. He had stopped all human interaction, neither wanting to speak nor to listen when he was addressed. Having come 'home', this victim chose to pass as a deaf-mute through his fading lifetime. At the end of his tortuous tether the worn-out coolie was not only a 'sucked orange' but had become a damaged commodity beyond repair, doomed to face life in the self-same loneliness he had endured passing through his trajectory of indenture.

The demise of the peasant economy and the rising rupture between the Global North and the Global South

The lens of this essay is on the profile of a workforce driven by colonial capitalism to mobility in a state of decrepitude out of the peasant economy. While Great Britain had been the focus of Karl Polanyi's magnum opus, Karl Kautsky discussed for imperial Germany in *Die Agrarfrage* (1899)

the same problematic. In France Alexis de Tocqueville commented on the agrarian question nearly half a century earlier in his last scholarly work, *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution* (1856). These three classical theses have in common the exodus from the peasant economy of a growing working class dispossessed of agrarian holdings, pushed to footloose existence in an accelerating process of agrarian capitalism in Europe's transition from a feudal to a post-feudal era. The imperialist high tide which originated in countries of the Global North during their formation as nation states in the course of the nineteenth century prevented the same metamorphosis in the parts of the Global South on which I have concentrated both my contemporary and historical research in Asia. The development of productive forces which essentialized the capitalist mode of production in the Northern Hemisphere was supposed to have remained absent in these colonized or, as in the case of China, semi-colonized domains of the world. Colonial capitalism arose in enclaves exploited by owners and managers of metropolitan capital while the peasant economy stagnated due to colonial policies which created a backward mode of agrarian production framed in excessive and usurious landlordism. This conclusion is specific to the densely populated countries in Asia. Most of the sub-Saharan countries in Africa had a much lower man to land ratio and were not subjected to large-scale proletarianization under colonialism. But several other forms of forced labour were introduced, as, for instance, massive conscription of corvée charges, which were not less cruel than enslavement had been (Breman 1990).

In the colonial lexicon cooliehood was the label of a labour class afflicted with working defects as well as imbibed with truancy and other mischief. Torn loose from the settled ranks of the peasantry they were distrusted, detested, derogated and discriminated (Breman 2020). So much so that after decolonization the Indian government issued an instruction which banned the term 'coolie' from officialese usage (see Government of India Ministry of Labour 1969: vol. 1, 31, n. 2). With the revision of the local-level Poor Laws in the first half of the nineteenth century, a similar stigmatization as scum or dregs disembedded from settled life and work was also the stigma attached to the rural proletariat which had become adrift in Europe. This steadily growing underclass was willy-nilly deprived from the earlier communal relief they used to enjoy during bouts of unemployment in the countryside and were forced now to vacate their village habitat. It was an intervention meant to pressurize land-poor and landless workers to rely no longer on claims for support in the slack season of the year for which the local non-poor had been taxed. Having become redundant in the agrarian economy, they were obligated

to sell their labour power to mills and seek work and shelter in rapidly industrializing towns and cities.

In another study, I elaborated on this forced exit of a pauperized class driven to footloose existence in Great Britain. Thomas Hardy wrote his appraisal of the farm labourer in Dorsetshire in the early 1880s, a trait that he featured as belonging to a sturdy though uncouth tribe at drift. However, in his narrative their rustic and endearing simplicity had gone. These qualities of the past had faded away with the changing modality of rural employment (Hardy 1883). The 'workfolk' were driven to mobility, a perpetual migration in circular movement much in excess of what it used to be: 'The Damocles' sword of the poor is the fear of being turned out of their houses by the farmer or squire.... They come and go yearly, like birds of passage, nobody thinks whence or whither' (Breman 2016: 207-8).

From close by Hardy observed a land flight going on, a veritable exodus from the countryside, which in his opinion was truly alarming. He concluded his lament by observing that 'the cause of morality cannot be served by compelling a population hitherto evenly distributed over the country to concentrate in a few towns, with the inevitable results of overcrowding and want of regular employment' (Breman 2016: 207-8). Having been made mobile perforce this workforce stood accused of habitual footlooseness, a stubborn unwillingness to settle down again in sedentary dependency.

In France Alexis de Tocqueville was impelled to deal with the escalating class conflict in his political career. The social question had become increasingly urgent with expulsion of labour from agriculture and the village community. *Dépôts de mendicité* for impoverished country folk had already been opened in the late feudal era. They were meant to set these footloose drifters to work in exchange for bed and board. As elsewhere in Europe, France had introduced laws against vagrancy, poaching and other offences that confirmed the image of the volatile proletariat as *la classe dangereuse*. Such attempts to restrain the immoral behaviour and wanderlust attributed to these paupers and thus put a stop to vagabondism, met with little success. They formed bands that came and went with the seasons and it proved impossible to place them under surveillance and transform their roaming existence into a sedentary one. How could this modern nomadism be brought under control? In Tocqueville's aristocratic perception, they were a motley mob made up of the poor, needy and homeless, work-shy, rebellious and insensitive to discipline in their precarious life on the margins of society (Tocqueville 1856). In his analysis of the June 1848 uprising in Paris, Karl Marx likewise held forth on the notion of a proletarian class which had broken all ties with their milieu of origin. This riffraff lacked

fixed shelter and had no proper or regular contacts with others in the same predicament. Having fallen into a state of destitution, they formed a beaten and apathetic muster of lone men, women with children, children without parents, the maimed, and the aged. In their declassed habitus they were genuinely uprooted and were seen by him as a counterrevolutionary force. He coined the term '*Lumpenproletariat*' to describe the plebs (plebeians) of ancient Rome and classified them as midway between freemen and slaves, never becoming more than a proletarian rabble.

> Alongside decayed *roués* with dubious means of subsistence and of dubious origin, alongside ruined and adventurous offshoots of the bourgeoisie, were vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, rogues, mountebanks, *lazzaroni*, pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, *maquereaus* [pimps], brothel keepers, porters, *literati*, organ grinders, rag-pickers, knife grinders, tinkers, beggars – in short, the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither, which the French term *la bohème*. (Marx 2010, 149)

The impact of the capitalist contrast between the metropoles and their colonies

Capitalism tore the fabric of peasantry apart in all parts of the world where the settled cultivation of food crops had come to dominate human existence through a slow process of evolution. However, the impact in the Global North and South on these peasantized economies was quite different. The trajectories of the dispossessed workforce expelled from their agrarian livelihood in the more densely populated zones of our planet started to diverge. In the Atlantic Basin this rural proletariat driven to mobility found employment and income in industrial-urban growth poles. No doubt, with the accelerating pace and spread of the capitalist mode of production they were ruthlessly exploited and oppressed, but the urbanized industrial working class was able to spearhead the struggle for emancipation. In concerted action this proletariat got organized in trade unions and political parties to improve conditions of employment, to seek protection against adversity and to secure social benefits which included dependent household members.

When the 'great transformation' was still going on, the nation states of the Global North came under political pressure to resort to the Bismarckian option of the 1880s which implied that in the process of state formation a public sector had to be instituted to operate as a buffer between the interests

of capital and labour. The labour rights gained gave rise to a standard work contract and ultimately broadened to a more comprehensive packet of welfarism – including public housing, healthcare, education and social security – which stayed intact until the last quarter of the twentieth century. In contrast, the workforce sliding down to the foot of the peasant economy in the colonized territories of Asia was subjugated by the colonial state to a much more dismal process of proletarianization. The enterprises of capitalist production, set up under expatriate control from the Global North, were given a free hand to run their excessively profitable business. Their owners and managers saw to it that the social question was not posed for the large mass of the workforce, let alone solved with decent terms of engagement and social security. The colonial state, acting in collusion with the stakeholders of expatriate capitalism, practiced global market-driven economic policies, which resulted in stark inequality. The large majority of the working mass remained stuck in unregulated employment. In the aftermath of independence the pledge made during the fight for national freedom to wipe out poverty and spread welfare has been more honoured in the breach than in the observance.

When enslavement had been declared illegal, bondage in debt harnessed the coolies to the worksite. Their indenture was backed up with penal sanctions introduced by the colonial government, which acted in tandem with expatriate capitalism to lock up this workforce in submissive obedience. In the ensuing acceleration of economic globalization, the acceptance of capitalist policies in postcolonial Asia means that the political regimes have discarded their claim to close the ever widening gap between the propertied and dispossessed classes. Does it mean that in the densely populated Asian countries cooliehood has endured in the aftermath of colonialism?

The end of cooliehood?

Cooliehood has been discussed in this essay as a feature of a commodified colonial workforce. How were labour relations restructured in China after the social revolution in the middle of the twentieth century? I made three research trips within Guangdong province in 1992, 2001 and 2008 to find out how the workforce at the bottom fared when the economy was opened up and thoroughly informalized from the end of the twentieth century onwards. In this region, a few Special Economic Zones were designated to kickstart capitalist enterprise. My investigations concerned its impact on the much expanded workforce. At the beginning of this century Xiamen and Shantou,

in particular, were two ports on the coast of south-east China, then known as Amoy and Swatow, respectively, from where the shipment took place of Chinese coolies who had been contracted for employment in Singapore, Malaya and Sumatra. These fairly insignificant coastal towns have developed within a short period of time into megacities, which, together with their immediate hinterland, enjoy the same economic policy and preferential treatment as Shenzhen next to Hong Kong. Free enterprise forms the engine of capitalist production. An enormous migratory workforce has settled in these growth poles, consisting of peasant migrants from central and western China. I described them in a short article as the present-day footloose coolies who, fobbed-off with low monthly wages of around 500 yuan, lived in barracks at the industrial worksite or, if engaged in self-employment, rented accomodation in apartment blocks built on the semi-urban periphery (Breman 1997: 868).

It was a view that I retracted in light of my new findings during my extended stay a decade later on. I spent time in the summer of 2008 teaching a term in Xiamen University and, accompanied by students or staff, carried out a sample survey targeted on the 'floating population' in several of the so-called 'urban villages' on the municipal's outskirts. The huge army of migrants from the nearby or faraway countryside was still kept lingering in *hukou* (household registation) status. It meant that they remained administratively registered where they came from and were also supposed to go back to their rural place of origin when their current employment ended. Most of these young adult male and female workers were clearly not willing to do that. They intended to settle down in the city they had reached, to get married and to set up a household in the hope of eventually qualifying for urban citizenship, which would in addition to higher income give them access to housing, healthcare, education and other benefits. Compared to the way in which landless and land-poor labour in India and Indonesia after independence were being pushed out of agriculture and the village habitat, their fellow classmates in China appeared to be much better off. That applied not only to the rising level of pay but also to the conditions of work. To illustrate this with just a few examples, construction workers were housed in barracks built for them on the site instead of being forced to squat down in the midst of whatever they were building, as is the standing practice in India. They were equipped with helmets, scaffolders wore gloves and hard shoes, gardeners used dust mask and protective glasses. It signifies that low-skilled and unskilled labour had attained both value and dignity (Breman 2010: 252-53).

However, this more positive appraisal is difficult to reconcile with findings highlighting a much bleaker landscape of labour, which had become

footloose. My short tours of research were targeted on the influx of immigrants from the countryside who settled down in localities at the fringe of the emerging megacities along the south-east coast. I refrained from extending my investigations to the large scale industries which housed their workforce in dormitories on the site. Admission to these premises turned out to be impossible without prior permission from the management. The locked-up workforce was also prevented from having visitors in their free time who could ask questions and I did not want to interview them in the presence of supervisory staff. The factory regime, in authoritative reports described as harsh and brutally exploitative, has therefore remained out of bounds for me. It was much easier to meet with the multitude of workers who had found accommodation in urban villages. I used to meet this much larger stock of migrants in their spare hours in the single room most of them had rented in one of the apartment blocks to gather information on their work and livelihood. Engaged as wage labour in micro-enterprises or in self-employed ventures in what had become a thoroughly capitalist economy, these newcomers impressed me as wanting to stay put where they had arrived and expected in due course to move up in the still expanding labour market. I may have understated in my published findings that the trajectories through which they manoeuvred to acquire more skilled, regular and higher paid jobs failed to match the hopeful aspirations they expressed when I met them.

The land reform, in China after the revolution, but also carried out after World War II in other countries of East Asia, had ultimately resulted in a more equal distribution of privatized holdings which were allotted, taking the household size into account. For sure, the cultivable property gained was too small to provide sufficient work and income for the average agrarian household. The solution of that problem required a regulated human exodus in a process of urbanization of a magnitude never seen before. But while this metamorphosis was going on, China had simultaneously been converted into an authoritarian surveillance state which denies democratic freedom and equality to its subaltern citizens who pay a high price for getting rid of poverty. The civil rights activists who dare to draw public attention to the close watch and scrutiny which security agencies keep over the population and critically discuss the manifold abuses committed by the apparatus of the state are prosecuted and brutally punished for their audacious dissent, as the annual reports of Human Rights Watch (2021, 2022) and Amnesty International (2022) amply document.

At much closer quarters and also for many more years than I was able to do, Ching Kwan Lee (2019) has monitored the impact of the policies of

economic informalization on China's working classes driven out of agriculture and the countryside. Her critical assessment emphasizes a pattern of employment which kept the migrant workforce in perpetual precarity. In the frame of neoliberalism capitalism can be earmarked as the bane of the labouring poor worldwide. Also, China passed through a social revolution which (in contrast to India and Indonesia) resulted in a major redistribution of agrarian property. In clear refutation of communist egalitarianism the upheaval might have caused the state agencies to remain diligently alert to restiveness among the disregarded and underprivileged ranks of the agrarian-rural proletariat. Lee argues that in both rural and urban China, the state is compelled by insistent popular restiveness to gradually develop and strengthen social and welfare policies to protect the livelihoods of its most vulnerable citizens (Lee 2019: 73).

The maintenance of stability is of prime concern for China's commanding heights and explains why the regime scaled up the social reproduction of labour as a major policy objective. Since labour rights and entitlements are regulated by local government, they differ according to the region in which the worker is registered. This is parcelled out at the household level rather than in atomized individuation and implies that not only the workers themselves but also their dependents are included in whatever provisions are available and can be accessed. The benefits attached to the *hukou* axiom are in the megacities of a much higher quantity and quality than in the rural hinterland. It is an asymmetry which has contributed to a staggering divide between rich and poor households. Among the latter there are many migrants who do not find the regular and regulated job, which is preconditional to scaling up their status of domicile. They are instead forced to go back to the locality in the rural backwaters they hail from and where 'the medical care is worse, the schools shabbier and the pension smaller' (*Economist* , 22 August 2022). In other words, precarity is ongoing, even though the policymakers have committed themselves to establish (in the course of time) a more even spread of welfarism, which would benefit the people made footloose, and to reduce the stark inequality in social security and protection.

The museumized past

In Xiamen the former cooliehood was kept alive in a museum which exhibited the trafficking of footloose labour to the Nanyang and its ferocious exploitation in debt bondage. Artefacts were displayed, such as a work book

in which daily presence and absence, tasks performed and pay due for it were listed; a pair of shorts as the only clothing the coolies wore; a cane with which they were beaten; a straw hat as protection while at work under the fierce sun; shackles fastened to the worker's ankles when penalized. Photos and videos depicted the depots in which the 'piglets' were warehoused on recruitment, boarding or disembarking the boat which ferried them overseas not as passengers but as cargo; injuries incurred while engaged in backbreaking and dangerous toil; the bare quarters in which the coolies were sheltered. I went around in these galleries when I was in the city in the early 1990s together with groups of well-dressed school children who looked aghast at what they saw.

On my return for a much longer stay in 2008 I visited the museum again and found that the exhibition had been transmogrified to highlight another stream of past emigration. The museumized commemoration of the 'piglets' in the past had been replaced by an exposition of the work and life experience of another, somewhat better-off class of sojourners. These were of petty bourgeois stock who settled down in the Nanyang as craftsmen, shopkeepers and traders also doubling as moneylenders. Some of them did very well in their business exploits and became big tycoons in Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia. They acknowledged their humble origin gratefully with generous donations which allowed for the cost of street pavements, the installation of tap water in their hometowns, the building of schools and hospitals and were also willing to repatriate part of their acquired riches to invest in joint venture syndicates. Former cooliehood was duly obliterated and seems to have vanished as a memorialized past.

Conclusion

Under the aegis of neoliberalism the capitalist trajectory of economic growth has worldwide, not least so in China, India and Indonesia, sharply widened the gap in wealth between the social classes leading to a rising divide in living standards. At the same time, absolute poverty declined in China from 84 per cent to 16 per cent of the population between 1980 and 2005, a finding also in critical studies not rejected as unwarranted. It is a fall in the magnitude of indigence, which neither Indonesia nor India have been able to match by far. In the last two countries the labouring poor who endeavour to go off in search of work far away from home are working age members of households bound to remain stuck in lifelong multi-locationality. This is elaborately documented for Indonesia in Breman and Wiradi (2002) and

affirmed once more in an Oxfam report entitled *Towards a More Equal Indonesia* (Gibson 2017) as well as in Sumner (2012). For India, I have argued the same in several publications (e.g. Breman 2003; Breman 2016).

The bottom ranks of the rural working classes in China share this misfortune, but after a number of years the household tends to be united again, equipped with *hukou* licence either in the city or in the hinterland. This is because the government of China acknowledges the nuclear family in its policies as the basic unit of cohabitation. It is an appraisal which does not apply to either Indonesia or India. Though in the latter country the word 'coolie' was banished from official use because of the derogatory meaning attached to the term in the colonial past, it has remained a common label in everyday parlance and refers in both India and Indonesia to casually engaged, unskilled, lowly paid and often indebted 'wage hunters and gatherers' (Breman 1994) bereft from social value and civil dignity. Their households are split up with members able to work hiving off to gain income elsewhere for themselves and their dependents, often until their labour power runs out. It means that work and life have become separated not at the household level but in individualized circuits. For these labouring poor cooliehood has become reshaped in a new configuration and setting, which in my perception is discernible more in Indonesia and India than in China.

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5 ‘A Crafty Lawyer of Shady Deals’

Justice, you shall pursue justice.
– Johannes van den Brand, *Slavenordonnantie en koelieordonnantie gevolgd door een ontwerp-arbeidswet* (1903)

It was inevitable that, during my research on coolie labour in colonial Asia, I would come across Johannes van den Brand. The lawyer’s 1902 pamphlet *De millioenen uit Deli* (The millions from Deli) was the starting point of my study of the labour regime in the plantation belt on the East Coast of Sumatra at the start of the twentieth century. Van den Brand sought publicity to bring about improvements in the miserable living conditions of the workforce on these large-scale agricultural enterprises. He received far greater attention than appreciation from his contemporaries for the way in which he opposed prevailing opinions and vested interests. Curiosity in what drove him to take this contrarian approach and how, despite fierce critique, he stuck to his convictions is not the only reason for devoting deserved attention to his crusade. The treatment suffered by Van den Brand also shows the foul means his opponents employed to render him harmless. Examining the actions of non-conformist figures offers a greater insight into the workings of the colonial apparatus and the way in which its officials dealt with dissenters in their ranks. It should also be noted that his presence on the colonial stage unfolded in the heyday of the Dutch ‘Ethical Policy’ in the East Indies.

From ally to traitor

Johannes van den Brand was certainly not the first to report on the abuses at the plantations. That maltreatment was widespread can be suspected from the constant flow of bad news that the colonial press, from the opening up of the region in the final quarter of the nineteenth century, tried to pass off as mere incidents. Van den Brand’s *De millioenen uit Deli* exposed what official policy had kept hidden from the public eye. The great furore following the publication of his booklet, especially in the homeland, had much to do with the identity of the author: a lawyer with a conscience who was prepared to reveal the dark side of plantation production and describe the inhuman conditions in which a large mass of labourers were forced to live and work. But the indignation that his publication provoked in the colony

was directed at the writer himself and not at the excesses he exposed. That they occurred frequently – rather than as 'once in a while mishaps' – was forcefully denied. 'Millions of untruths', according to the headline of *De Sumatra Post* on 27 November 1902. The response focused mainly on the man who aimed to turn public opinion against the plantation owners and managers. Such vehement emotions were undoubtedly sincere and were grounded in incomprehension and anger that someone from one of their own tribe had turned out to be a traitor. Only a few years earlier, Van den Brand had openly expressed opinions that were no different from those that he now lambasted. His opponents tried to harm his credibility by quoting in detail from articles he had written for *De Sumatra Post* in 1899, in which he asserted that the quality of the plantation workforce was deplorable, that cruelty to coolies among planters was an exception and that the colonial authorities always took proper action in the rare cases that did occur.

Van den Brand had brought these attacks upon himself by digging up an old case without mentioning that the interpretation that he now gave it in writing was completely at odds with the standpoint he had taken during his time as editor of *De Sumatra Post*. In 1899, an employee of an enterprise falling under the British Deli and Langkat Tobacco Company had submitted a complaint against the plantation's directors in London for unjustified dismissal. Any civilized Englishman, he had informed his superiors from Sumatra's East Coast, would refuse to subordinate himself to a Dutch planter who committed the most heinous abuses against the coolies employed on the estate. After his letter arrived at the company's office in London, the man who had submitted the complaint was dismissed forthwith. However, the court ruled in favour of the plaintiff and reprimanded his employers for not having conducted further enquiries into the case. Embarrassed, the company directors contacted the Dutch ambassador in London, requesting clarity on the allegations. The affair attracted a great deal of publicity, also in the Netherlands. From Medan, Van den Brand stated in his newspaper that he welcomed any inquiry. He praised the regional branch of the civil service for the quality of their governance and ended by saying that anyone acquainted with the accused planter knew that he would never engage in such abusive practices. Of course, things happened from time to time that would be considered unacceptable according to European standards, but forceful action was often necessary and the workers themselves saw no harm in corporal punishment. The editor spoke of the uncouth temper of the coolies in sarcastic and derogatory terms: 'Oh, no, the true-hearted, good-natured Javanese are meek and obedient, they do not defy or provoke. They excel in their sincerity and honesty' (*De Sumatra Post*, 31 January 1899).

These were excellent quotations with which to pursue Van den Brand a few years later (*De Sumatra Post*, 7 February 1903). Yet, he could be accused of little more than having radically revised his views on the appalling conditions in which coolies worked. He had no difficulty at all in admitting his changed opinion, stating that a year and a half of daily contact with coolies freed from their contracts had completely changed his mind. The turning point came after a short stay in Malacca, where he spent a few months in 1899 representing the interests of a mining company in which he also had a financial share. When he explained to the British resident of Pahang the penal sanction in the coolie ordinance of Deli, which allowed plantation owners to punish their coolies in any way they saw fit, the latter responded with deep horror, exclaiming, 'We don't want slavery here.' This response apparently opened Van den Brand's eyes (*De Sumatra Post*, 5 January 1903).

Van den Brand's changed mindset led him to enter into a partnership to run his legal practice with fellow lawyer C. de Coningh. Under a pen name, the latter contributed critical articles for the *Java-Bode* from Medan on abuses on the plantations of Sumatra's East Coast. Two like-minded souls joined forces in an alliance against large-scale malpractice about which little was known. Their opening of this Pandora's box enormously irritated the regional government, as is clear from a secret memorandum from the resident to the governor-general:

> He [Van den Brand] is assisted by his loyal partner De Coningh, like himself a failed and socially isolated individual, whose articles in the *Java-Bode*, written under a pseudonym, stand out for their most hateful and personal attacks and parodies, and whose sharp pen is never constructive but constantly destructive and derisive.[1]

As advocates of free labour, both legal practitioners spoke at a meeting held to mark the arrival in Medan in the spring of 1902 of Henri van Kol, member of parliament in the Netherlands for the Social Democratic Labour Party (Sociaal-Democratische Arbeiderspartij, SDAP). Van den Brand's *De millioenen uit Deli* began with an account of their speeches on this occasion.

The lawyer's opponents showed hardly any interest in how and why Van den Brand came to have such a remorseful change of heart. They devoted more time and energy in search of evidence to portray the author as an unreliable character. Showing him up to be a good-for-nothing was primarily designed to falsify the image that he projected of himself, as an honest

1 J. Ballot, Exhibitum, 26 April 1906, no. 122, Algemeen Rijksarchief.

Christian who could not condone the oppression and exploitation on which the plantation economy was based. His appeal to the conscience of Christian politicians in the home country gave his accusations a dangerous political tint. He had described Deli not only as a hell for the coolies, but also as a den of iniquity in which the planters earned exorbitant amounts of money, lived in luxury and spent their off work hours drinking and feasting. In a letter to *De Sumatra Post*, Van den Brand announced that he would not respond to the deluge of accusations directed at him. He saw himself in the first place accountable to God and his own conscience and only in the second place to the government. Attacks on his person in the local press would remain unanswered by him.

Suspicions were immediately aroused that his actions were driven by political ambition. There were suggestions that Van den Brand was seeking a seat in parliament for the Anti-Revolutionaire Partij (Anti-Revolutionary Party, ARP), of which he was a member. The publication of his libellous booklet assured him of the publicity he needed to return on a home visit to the Netherlands and pursue this aim. For those who adhered to this view, his return a little over a year later came as no surprise. It was seen as the first step towards achieving what they considered his concealed political motive. But it was an interpretation which conflicted with the fact that Van den Brand's departure from Medan had the nature of a flight. The black sheep had been expelled from the flock for the way in which he had called Deli's fame into question. Local business figures published advertisements and also communicated by word of mouth announcing that they had broken all ties with the law firm J. van den Brand & Co. The *Arnhemsche Courant* (23 December 1903) published a number of passages from letters the lawyer had written to his family in the Netherlands, which revealed that he had lost the trust and clientship from the network to which he belonged:

> The planters have joined forces against me and now boycott any merchant who does business with me. The merchants, who are all dependent on the planters, have no choice. Even as I write this, another client has terminated our relationship. My life here is almost unbearable. You have heard of the boycott. It is now so bad that my neighbour has moved away, as he would lose his customers if he continued to have contact with me. He chose to leave to put an end to all such suspicions; everywhere is resistance, open or covert.... A leper is not more despised than I am. The leader of the Chinese has coerced them (though it cannot be proved) to stop doing business with me.

Reports that Van den Brand was being socially boycotted and robbed of his livelihood also appeared in the Dutch press (*De Amsterdammer*, 4 December 1903). His brother contacted Minister of Colonies Idenburg to draw his attention to what was happening to a fellow Christian in the colony: being ostracized by the planters purely and simply 'because he had found the moral courage in his religious convictions to expose the abuses in Deli without attacking anyone personally'.

Shortly after his arrival in the Netherlands, Van den Brand sent an extensive account to Idenburg about how, at the behest of the president of the Planters' Association – who was also the president of the Deli Company – the proposal he had initiated to establish a Council of Justice in Medan had come to nothing. This clearly showed that the lawyer may have been driven out but was not defeated and was continuing his fight against the plantation clique with unabated energy in the Netherlands. Having received this documentation, Minister Idenburg invited his fellow party member to come and see him in office, but nothing is further known of their meeting and it certainly had no political consequences.

A whistle-blower whose call fell on deaf ears

How did the ARP on the right flank of the political spectrum respond to Van den Brand's appeal to the Christian nation? Its spokesmen were supportive, albeit somewhat sparingly and cautiously. In the first instance, there was little more than praise. *De Getuige* (The witness), a Christian weekly, published in the Netherlands Indies, devoted an acclamatory review to *De millioenen uit Deli* and lauded its author for exposing 'this alarming cancerous growth' (16 January 1903). But in a more detailed discussion that followed shortly afterwards, ARP politician Hendrikus Colijn showed himself much more reticent. Of course, he fully agreed with Van den Brand that the most blatant materialism flourished in Deli and that European capital made exorbitant profits. But, in his view, to point to the coolie labour system as the primary cause of the injustice was premature. The 'native' did not possess the discipline required for regular labour. The threat of and, if necessary, the actual meting out of corporal punishment and detention with forced labour for severe laziness and dereliction of duty was an inevitable consequence of this dismal situation. Legal sanctions following failure to comply with labour contracts were therefore indispensable. Referring to this as veiled slavery did no justice to the intentions of the government, just as Van den Brand's claim that

the coolie ordinance was in conflict with Christian principle was false (*De Getuige*, 30 January and 6 February 1903).

When Van den Brand argued in a subsequent publication in favour of new labour legislation without penal sanctions, Colijn again opposed the idea. The coolie may be a human being, but a brother? No, not at all. The Christian principles underpinning Van den Brand's words were indisputable. But his ideas were too radical for the party leadership to allow him to enter the political arena. He did not receive sufficient support to be eligible for the ARP list of candidates for the forthcoming elections.[2] This bitter pill was sweetened by the words of praise that minister of colonies Idenburg devoted to Van den Brand in parliament. The little that is known of the inquiry set up by public prosecutor Rhemrev gave every reason for such appreciation as I have documented in my study on the plantation work regime (Breman 1989).

The pariah from Deli was showered with praise for his moral appeal and was officially cleared of all blame. But that was as far as it went. The call on the government in *De Amsterdammer* (4 December 1904) to reward the man who had opened a can of worms and had experienced so much injustice for his civil courage with a public post was completely ignored.

Van den Brand had no other choice than to return to his colonial legal practice. In early November 1904 he came back to Medan, where no one had expected to see him again. Rather than toeing the mainstream line, he resumed his crusade against the planters and the government with unabated vigour. The chances that he would be able to hold his own against this united front were very small. Indicative of the hostile atmosphere he encountered was an anonymous comment 'from a local source' – undoubtedly Van den Brand himself – published in *De Getuige*: 'Many, also in Deli, are on his side; but covertly, for fear of the power that the enemies of this champion of justice have at their disposal' (26 January 1906). He badly needed all the support in this milieu he could gather, as a new witch hunt was already well underway. The detailed records I accessed in the archives show that regional officials of the civil service were infuriated and did their utmost to bring the 'crafty lawyer of shady deals' – as resident J. Ballot had referred to him in official correspondence – to his knees.

What really unnerved his opponents, however, was that as a legal practitioner Van den Brand knew the rules of the judicial game. Moreover, by now he had become a public figure who did not hesitate to mobilize

2 Report from Attorney-General De Zwaan to the governor-general, March 1907: 69, Algemeen Rijksarchief; *Java-Bode*, 6 December 1921.

political leverage. The opinion articles that he continued to publish in *De Getuige* about what kept happening to him were very effective. He found a sympathetic ear in the less opinionated press in both the colony and the homeland. Of all the malign treatment he received, the attempts of local officials to evict him from his office and so put a stop to his legal practice were the most vicious. Pieter Jelle Troelstra, leader of the SDAP in the Dutch parliament, asked the minister of colonies in the lower house for clarification on the ongoing conflict. The attorney-general in Batavia then sent a telegram to the resident of Sumatra's East Coast ordering him to provide Van den Brand with police protection against eviction from his office-cum-home. This happened immediately after the governor-general had granted Van den Brand an audience. It was a gesture that should be seen in the context of the praises that had been showered on the recalcitrant lawyer in the Dutch parliament. The head of the regional civil service disputed the complaint that Van den Brand had lodged against him, demanding restoration of his honour and reputation. In his turn, the resident asserted that the allegation that the local authority had taken action against the lawyer at the insistence of the Deli Company was unfounded. Van den Brand himself drew attention to the black book that the Deli Company had drawn up about him and his booklets and articles. He claimed that the company's CEO had given this faked evidence to the resident to use as he saw fit (*De Getuige*, 8 September 1905). This led the colonial headquarters in Batavia to set up the public enquiry that both Van den Brand and the regional civil service had called for.

Attorney-general B.H.P. van der Zwaan was instructed to verify the accuracy of Van den Brand's accusations. But no one among his staff in the Department of Justice was willing to comply and go to Deli to investigate the dispute on the spot. It seems reasonable to assume that this stubborn refusal to take on the job was founded on a fear of coming back with an unwelcome message, as happened to public prosecutor Rhemrev when he was charged with the official investigation of Van den Brand's diatribe against the 'coolie scandal' on Sumatra's East Coast in 1903. The attorney-general consequently decided to go to Medan himself and reported on his findings in March 1907. All of Van den Brand's claims were in the clearest of terms resolutely dismissed. Van der Zwaan stated immediately in his introduction that the plaintiff had made an extremely unfavourable impression on him. Although he had taken care to give the lawyer the benefit of the doubt, this initial impression was not diminished by what he had heard from all sides. What follows in the attorney-general's report contradicts his claims of rectitude and impartiality. I would qualify the report as a laundering operation in which the central and regional authorities conspired.

According to Van der Zwaan, the officials he had spoken to had never lied, while he regularly found the lawyer and his office staff engaging in deceit and downright falsehood. Van der Zwaan repeated what resident Ballot had written about Van den Brand:

> With such boundless atrocities depicted so vividly in his pamphlet, no one familiar with the circumstances here, and with the character of the author, would doubt for a moment that it was designed not to improve the situation or driven by sympathy with the oppressed, but served only for the glorification, *ad majorem gloriam*, of Van den Brand himself.[3]

In similar terms, the attorney-general portrayed the lawyer as someone who donned the martyr's crown and, as a pseudo-fighter against injustice. He had attacked officials of impeccable virtue who deserved praise instead of blame. The cracks in the accounts of these two high-ranking officials were carefully smoothed over, while any inconsistencies in the statements made by Van den Brand and his supporters were cast as distortions of the truth. This shows that the lawyer had come off worst in the dispute, but without capitulating to the collusion between government and the power of the planters' lobby.

The enquiry set up at his request had turned against the lawyer, a result that did not surprise him. When J.B. van Heutsz was appointed governor-general, Van den Brand announced with his customary militancy that it would not signify a change of course (*De Getuige*, 18 August 1905). In between times, he continued to publish critiques of the coolie ordinance (Van den Brand 1903, 1904a, 1904b). In the same spirit he was also the first to assess the action taken by the Labour Inspectorate on the East Coast, established as a result of his efforts. On balance, his conclusion in 1907 was that the conditions of the coolies on the plantations had certainly improved. Healthcare and housing, in particular, were a little bit better and although it was still quite common for coolies to be beaten and kicked, serious physical abuses had become less common. It was in his view going too far to ascribe these changes for the better to government inspection and control. Under pressure from unfavourable publicity, the plantation companies had also started introducing reforms on their own initiative. Yet, Van den Brand had remained distinctly critical of the inspectorate's agency in ameliorating the conditions of coolie work and livelihood. Its small staff had little scope to bargain for a better deal and lacked the authority to take a firm stand

3 Letter to G.G., 29 January 1906, no. 7; Exhibitum, 26 April 1906, no. 122, Algemeen Rijksarchief.

against employers. The companies did not easily tolerate these officials and their 'spies'. They were still alarmed by what Rhemrev had been told by the contract-free coolies he had sent out to assess the situation. Inspectors had to announce their visits in advance and heard only what the assembled coolies dared to tell them in the presence of the plantation management. And that was by no means all. The lawyer urged, again in vain, that the inspectorate be given effective logistical instructions and stated that it could only operate effectively if it were made autonomous from the regional branch of the civil service (Van den Brand 1907). He could not have known (or perhaps he could?) that his recommendations were directly in opposition to the views of governor-general Van Heutsz, who a year later wrote to minister Idenburg that he would never make the Labour Inspectorate independent of supervision by the resident of Sumatra's East Coast (19 April 1908[4]).

Resurrection as a trade union leader

Gradually, Van den Brand had managed to lay down solid roots in the region. He was not as isolated from the expatriate community as his enemies in the colonial bureaucracy implied. The social boycott against this troublemaker was apparently short-lived. Van den Brand became a prominent figure in the church life of Medan and, some years later, he entered local politics, as chairman of the association which listed voters allowed to take part in the municipal elections. In 1913, he gathered sufficient support to win a seat on this newly established municipal council, a position he held until the end of 1918. Had he emerged as a pillar of the colonial bourgeoisie after all? He was unable to extract himself from the white elite but there is no doubt that he continued to broadcast his own divergent views within the circuit of expatriates. Together with a number of like-minded individuals, he formed a small faction 'on the extreme-left wing of political Christianity' (*Java-Bode*, 6 December 1921).

In 1917, he was again the centre of controversy when he agreed to become acting secretary-editor of the Assistant Plantation Managers' Association in Deli. He had been persuaded to take the position by A.J.E. Dingemans, who was also a member of the municipal council. They acted together on all issues discussed by the council and their alliance had also led earlier to

4 See Archief Idenburg no.129 A 11.2.b. Bijzondere brievenverzameling Idenburg/Van Heutsz 7-9-1903/5-8-1905 en brievenverzameling 29-8=1905/2-5-1919 in Historisch Documentatie Centrum Nederlands Protestantisme.

Van den Brand being appointed as legal consultant to the association. This trade union had been set up on 1 January 1909 to represent the interests of the white junior managers in negotiations on their terms of employment with the board of the companies in Europe and their local senior managers, who were given charge of one or more plantations. The union met with much resistance from the employers. Dingemans was the core figure in the association, which counted 643 members at its annual general meeting in 1917. With a sharp pen, he edited the union's magazine *De Planter*, which was published every two weeks and had at that time a circulation of 1,172. For the employers, the appointment of Van den Brand as a temporary stand-in for Dingemans, who was about to return to Europe on leave, must have been a difficult pill to swallow. But did those reservations not also apply to the assistants themselves? The complaints against the higher ranks of the plantation management that members aired in *De Planter* from the establishment of the association were often surpassed by their grievances against the labourers. Van den Brand's notorious booklet was by no means forgotten and there was much annoyance and a lot of grumbling against him as champion of the coolies. Rhemrev's enquiry had led to greater government interference and control, but had the unintended and unfortunate effect of making the labourers more vocal:

> The consequence of establishing the labour inspectorate is that the bellwethers at the work floor, emboldened by this regrettable change, are becoming increasingly audacious and impertinent. In the past, they would have been given a sound beating, and violent assaults on their bosses were an exception. Today, these scoundrels can no longer be disciplined but only enjoy a few days in detention at the government's pleasure. As a result, murder and manslaughter [of assistant managers] have become the order of the day. (*De Planter*, 4 February 1917)

There were indeed deep divisions among the union's members and outsiders stoked the flames. Notorious journalist Karel Wybrands, by chance visiting Sumatra's East Coast where he had started off his career in the colonial media from 1896 to 1901, spoke of disgrace and wrote in a letter published in the Medan press that the union would make itself a laughing stock forever if it allowed this man to be appointed as caretaker (*De Sumatra Post*, 8 February 1917). Dingemans did not take that sharp attack on the lawyer's record lying down. In an expansive response, he warned readers not to be led by the hatred that the planters' clique in Deli had nurtured against Van den Brand fifteen years earlier, and which Wijbrands, as editor of a popular

daily newspaper, had made every effort to keep alive ever since. Dingemans quoted from an article by Wijbrands in which, angered by the murder of a planter, he rejected all legal reformism and called for the Labour Inspectorate set up on Sumatra's East Coast to be abolished. The only way to keep the coolies under the thumb was to beat them soundly with the rattan stick. In response to this tirade, Dingemans wrote:

> I was an assistant manager for fifteen years, and I would be the last person – or rather not at all – to condemn an assistant for giving a coolie a few well-deserved blows. I know from experience how one can be provoked to mete out such punishment. But, between understanding and therefore apologizing for such an occasional reprimand and the cold-bloodied advice to beat them soundly, there is a deep chasm, the bridging of which I do not take upon myself. (*De Sumatra Post*, 10 February 1917)

Wybrand's response was that his tour of the plantation belt showed that everyone – both planters and officials – shared his negative opinion of Van den Brand's candidacy. Van den Brand now joined the fray himself, with a dignified article in which he stated with understandable satisfaction that his pamphlets had brought about or at least expedited the necessary reforms in the region. He explained once again how in the labour law, as proposed and designed by him, corporal punishment could be abandoned with no negative consequences for the employers. He also referred to his opponent's call for 'Order through Might':

> There is no alternative, but to beat the coolies! I am not prepared to sacrifice the precious lives of Europeans. And if the planter's rod can assure security and maintenance of proper order,... which the judicial toga and ethical nonsense apparently cannot,... what is there to stop the boss from taming his coolies? Beat them soundly!

Anyone who agrees with this, Van den Brand was saying, should not vote for me. He only needed a few words to clarify his own programme: 'Order through Law' (*De Sumatra Post*, 14 February 1917). At an extraordinary general meeting of the union, he was chosen as Dingemans' replacement with 246 of the 281 votes cast. According to a comment in *De Sumatra Post*, 'the assistant managers had made it clear that they did not wish to be white officials who had to use the stick to keep control of a troop of coolies duped into a coercive contract, but demand that the government and employers create such labour relations that they will no longer be the buffer between capital

and labour' (2 March 1917). The members did, however, impose restrictions on Van den Brand. There was no place for sharp criticism of the employers. Van den Brand had to pledge in writing that he would seek the consent of the union board before publishing articles in *De Planter* that criticized specific enterprises. The whole commotion eventually proved to have been for nothing as Dingemans, who had difficulties returning to Europe because of the war waged in Europe, called off his plans to go on leave.

But the union continued to need Van den Brand's professional expertise during the negotiations that started in the spring of 1917 on the drafting of a new employment contract for the European staff in Deli, which would include withdrawal of the clause preventing junior managers from marrying. This ban, which set a premium on concubinage, started to be lifted, albeit hesitantly, a few years later from 1919 onwards (Baai 2009; Pusztai and Praamstra 1997).

As has already become clear, the employers were anything but delighted at the existence of a genuine trade union and were not pleased to see their assistant managers become members. It could cost them promotion, making them reluctant to disclose their membership. Dingemans had to reserve a lot of space in the union magazine for complaints. Yet the assistants did not express grievances only about their on-the-spot or far-off superiors. In their letters, they often vented their displeasure at the inferior quality and bad behaviour of the labourers.

Throughout the years, this anti-coolie mentality was a persistent and conspicuous feature of the magazine. It was undoubtedly closely related to the growing restiveness among the workforce about their oppression and exploitation, which was mainly aimed at the first-line management. What the latter experienced as attacks was seen by the former as revenge for the intolerable treatment they had suffered. But the opposing sides were of course not equal in terms of power and, as the subservient party, the coolies had no leverage at all to draw attention to their exploitation. Occasionally, an awareness that both sides were the victims of a harsh work regime would rise to the surface, for example, in the observation that the assistants resorted to corporal punishment under pressure from increasingly higher production targets that drove both coolies and their direct bosses to their limits. Yet, the assistants felt themselves to be the real victims of this spiral and the coolies remained the object of their animosity and disgust. The remedy they recommended was to appoint former planters as labour inspectors. After all, they knew all the tricks of the trade and knew how to firmly deal with the indolence and disobedience of the labourers. An assistant manager who, together with the foreman of his work gang, had thrown a coolie into a river with the intention of killing him could

count on clemency. In the account of this 'tale of suffering', it was naturally the perpetrator of this crime who took on the guise of victim (*De Planter*, 21 April 1921). The union magazine would occasionally print short accounts of daily life on the plantation. These articles, intended to be humorous, often had as subject the cunning and deceitful mentality of the coolie. The moral and tone were unadulteratedly racist. Van den Brand did not share the anti-coolie fervour that prevailed within the union. Time and again he had to defend his rejection of the penal sanction which was rigorously retained in the coolie ordinance. What he envisaged was a system of fully free labour and he was a vocal proponent of introducing it in the shortest possible term. His plea would continue to be totally disregarded (see also Darini and Aggraeni 2021; Teeuwen 2022).

Agitation and backlash

Van den Brand expressed his opinions even more forcefully in a series of articles published in 1918 in the *Vrijzinnig Weekblad*, the magazine of the Nederlandsch-Indische Vrijzinnige Bond (Dutch-Indian Liberal Union) (Poeze 1982: lvi and lvii). The articles presented the same ideas that he had embraced at the beginning of the century. New was his call for a separate coolie union as a necessary counterbalance to the power of capital. According to Van den Brand, the time had come to take that step.

> [I]n regions like the East Coast of Sumatra, where large coolie colonies exist, a union of labourers should be set up, whose board, like that of the European employees' union, the Assistant Managers' Association in Deli, should represent the interests of its members and take cognizance of their complaints and objections. Do you think this a figment of the imagination? Just wait, time is marching forward! (Van den Brand 1918: 741)

Such radical advocacy in the plantation belt would undoubtedly have been a topic of heated discussion, though not publicly but behind closed doors. Van den Brand himself did not take part in it. At the end of 1918, he went to Europe on leave, ostensibly for health reasons. He stayed away for more than a year, returning to the East Coast in mid-1920. A few months later, the president of the union, C.E.W. Krediet, was dismissed from his post. He had attracted severe blame for his approval of the strike that had broken out among the Indonesian employees of the Deli Railway Company. Krediet had daringly contacted the strike leaders and, supporting their grievances,

had tried in vain to persuade the junior managers at the plantations to join in the industrial action. Police spies followed him and reported that he had attended a secret nocturnal conclave on the progress of the strike. 'Although I am myself a European,' he announced at the meeting, 'I belong to the working class.' In view of the out and out capitalist business climate in Deli, it was an exceptionally revolutionary statement. Krediet identified Tan Malaka, who was working as a teacher at a plantation school at that time, as his ally.

Together with a handful of sympathizers, Krediet called for the establishment of a single labour association, under the name Een vóór Allen (One for All), of which both Indonesians and Europeans could become members (Poeze 1976: 88-90; Tan Malaka 1991: 196). The majority of members of the white trade union, however, were aghast at the audacity of their spokesman. This clash of opinion erupted in the fiercest of terms when Krediet raged at an assistant manager who was prepared to help break the strike by offering his services as a train driver. The latter defended himself against the accusation that he was a scab by saying that the strikers were only 'inlanders' who were, in the words of one planter, '*babis* [pigs] on two legs'. The advertisement in which the union leadership called on their members not to sign up as strike-breakers was dropped at the last minute under strong pressure from the employers. At a meeting held shortly afterwards, it was clear that most union members vehemently disagreed with their chairman. Krediet showed himself to support not only the striking railway workers, but added fuel to the fire by also tabling a proposal to campaign for a wage rise for the plantation coolies to end their exploitation. His plea was not endorsed, but harshly shot down. The view that allowing the strike to continue would jeopardize law and order on the plantations received almost unanimous support: 'Where will it end if contract labourers are made aware that, if necessary, they have the means to enforce their demands?' Krediet was unwilling to answer questions from the members whether he had gone so far as to ally himself with the strike leaders (*De Planter*, 15 September 1920). His downfall in disgrace could not have been more painful. Only a few days after the dramatic meeting, he boarded ship for the homeland. Anyone who had committed such a dire violation of the proper colonial code of conduct by calling for fraternization between white and brown in Deli's enclave of hardcore capitalism should expect nothing less than the ultimate sanction: immediate exile from the plantation domain.

Van den Brand registered as a candidate for the presidency of the union, stating in his application letter that, if he was appointed, he would submit his resignation as lawyer and public prosecutor to the Council of Justice in

Medan, 'so that I can devote myself entirely to representing the interests of your association' (*De Planter*, 1 December 1920). And so it happened: on New Year's Eve he was elected with three-quarters of the votes cast. This salaried position entailed his relocation to Java in the spring of 1921. Before his nomination, contacts had already been made with the leaders of various organizations in which the European employees of colonial enterprises were united. At the end of 1918, the board of the union in Deli received an invitation from the Sugar Association and the Agricultural Syndicate – both of which operated on Java – to form a federation for the managerial staff of all large-scale estates in the archipelago. This would be the first step towards far-reaching amalgamation of white employees' interests. The Assistant Managers' Association in Deli also responded positively to the merger and Van den Brand was asked to represent the union at the first meeting of the Federation of European Employees on 31 January 1921 in Surabaya. The list of affiliated organizations offers an insight into the composition and political clout of the white labour aristocracy engaged in the agrarian and non-agrarian sectors of the colonial economy. The main outcome of the founding meeting was the drafting of a petition presented to governor-genreal J.P. van Limburg Stirum to select someone to represent the 12,000 organized employees in the People's Council established as a pseudo-parliament of the Dutch Indies. Van den Brand was mentioned in the proposal as the most suitable candidate and a short time later he was indeed nominated to the council.

His delicate health did not stop him from taking on the new challenge awaiting him with all the energy he could spare. Shortly before, the militant lawyer had been installed as interim president of the new federation. At the annual meeting in Surabaya in mid-September 1921, he gave the opening speech in which he accused the government of pursuing a weak labour policy. But his fierce criticism also targeted the affiliated unions which kept a low and docile profile when bargaining for better terms of employment. Disappointed by the lack of support he received in clamouring for industrial action, Van den Brand stepped down from the leadership of the federation to devote himself fully to his membership of the People's Council.

In a series of articles, Van den Brand urged the colonial government to introduce social legislation to provide badly needed relief in the face of growing economic hardship. In his view, this was an inevitable consequence of the Netherlands joining the League of Nations. Facing a short-term recession in the early 1920s, employers had reduced wages and withdrawn other rights workers had gained. Shocked by the ruthlessness of big business, Van den Brand argued that only a joint front of foreign and Indonesian workers

would be able to cope with adversity. Reprieve would also not come from the colonial authorities since they abided with the dictates laid down by the magnates of corporate capitalism. He rejected the repeated insinuation that the European Federation had radical political intentions and insisted that the affiliated trade unions went no further than to promote the economic interests of their members (*Vrijzinnig Weekblad*, 24 September 1921: 436). But he also pointed out that the Indonesian unions had even less room for manoeuvre and predicted that the colonial government would not be wary of using force to repress any action instigated from that side, on the pretext of maintaining law and order (*Vrijzinnig Weekblad*, 10 and 17 September 1921: 423).

That he was aware of this political restriction and, more than that, rejected any impropriety and prejudice on the basis of skin colour, is clear from what was probably his final statement on the platform of decency and fairness that he stood for and served: 'This article does not discuss the Indonesian trade unions. Yet of course, any justice for the European should also apply to the Indonesian' (*Vrijzinnig Weekblad*, 19 November 1921: 535). Van den Brand's compassion lay with the far more oppressed and exploited mass of Indonesian labourers as is clear from the last speech he delivered in the People's Council a few days before his demise in late November 1921:

> Conditions on East Coast of Sumatra are appalling and it would not be difficult to write another 'Millions from Deli'. Time and again new discoveries led to variants of the old scandals which will never disappear for good as long as the coolie ordinance remains in force. (Volksraad 1921: 156)

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Part III

Civilization and Racism

Figure 6.1. The Monument to the Belgian Pioneers in Congo in Jubelpark/Parc du Cinquantenaire in Brussels. The Congo monument in Jubelpark in Brussels that the king commissioned bears the following inscription: 'I have undertaken the work in the Congo in the interest of civilization and for the good of Belgium. Leopold II, 3 June 1906'. And in the cornice: 'Erected in honour of the first Belgian pioneers.' Photo by EmDee, CCBY-SA3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=26004752.

6 Primitive Racism in a Colonial Setting

> [O]ne comes to hate those savages – hate them to the death....
> No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it –
> this suspicion of their not being inhuman.
> – Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* [1902] (1985:47, 69)

A state of terror: Congo at the start of the twentieth century

> We must beat them until they submit unconditionally or until they are all exterminated.... Tell Inongo's men for the last time and then put your plan into immediate operation to go with them into the jungle, or else meet them in the village with a cudgel in your hands. You say to the owner of the first hut: here is a basket, go and fill it with rubber. Go into the forest at once, and if you are not back within eight days with 5 kilos of rubber, I shall set fire to your hut! – and you burn it down as you have promised. The cudgel can be used to drive those men into the forest who do not want to leave the village. If you burn one hut after another, you shouldn't have to set fire to them all to force their obedience. (Quoted in Delathuy 1989: 519)

This took place in the Congo region at the end of the nineteenth and the start of the twentieth century. Earlier, the people had been compelled to gather a certain amount of wild rubber each month in payment for the civilization that had been brought to them under European rule. King Leopold II of Belgium had chosen this theatre of operations, eighty times as large as his own country, in which to consummate his colonial ambitions. Africa was not his first choice. That had been the Far East, where he had been unable to gain a foothold. When this became obvious he turned his attention to the still largely unknown Dark Continent. As of the mid-1870s the monarch dispatched 'scientific' expeditions to explore the Congo region, some led by the already famous explorer Henry Morton Stanley.

By making deft use of the rivalry among the Great Powers and their obsession with overseas expansion, and as a result of the 1885 Conference on the Division of Africa in Berlin, Leopold II asked and obtained permission to establish the Congo Free State. For the sake of the outside world, emphasis was placed on the humanitarian objectives of this colonial enterprise: to end slavery and other abuses, and, with the aid of missionaries, to bring

material and spiritual benefits to the people. Far less emphasis was placed on the advantages that would accrue to the colonizer himself, although this was undoubtedly the prime motive. Leopold took as his operational model the system of forced cultivation so profitably introduced in the East Indies by the Dutch during the second half of the 1800s. Leopold looked upon J.W.B. Money's *Java, or How to Manage a Colony* (1861) as a manual of colonial exploitation.

The Belgian monarch's intention was to capitalize on his new property by introducing a system of forced labour, but initially this met with little success. The tribal peoples of the Congo practised some agriculture but such that they could not easily be mobilized to cultivate the new crops demanded by the world market. It was immediately decreed in 1885 that all land not in use by the local peoples for food crops would henceforth be the property of the state, together with the yield of these so-called 'empty lands'. A few years later, a new decree forbade the sale of the country's produce, especially ivory, to private traders. In this way, the colonial administration was able to sequestrate all economic resources. During the first ten years or so, however, costs outran economic returns due to the lack of adequate methods of exploitation.

The business of colonization proved far more expensive than Leopold had anticipated. Considerable investment was needed for the military occupation of the country, for the development of infrastructure, and for the introduction of an administrative machinery. By the end of the nineteenth century, the bureaucratic apparatus employed approximately 2,000 people, most of whom were Belgian (including many army officers on temporary assignment) but also including Italians, Scandinavians and other Europeans. The immense territory over which they were dispersed was divided into districts, zones and sectors. The lowest link in the administrative chain was formed by the government posts, of which there were 183 in 1900. Boma was the capital of the country, but the real seat of government was in Brussels. Lastly, outfitting a colonial army demanded enormous sums of money. It was needed for the pacification of the country, and consisted of African mercenaries, initially imported from other countries, and commanded by white officers. Leopold had little success in attracting private capital, since the prospect of high yields at first seemed anything but likely. The Belgian government thus had to come to the rescue with considerable loans to prevent its monarch from getting into financial difficulties with his risky enterprise.

The West's rapidly growing demand for rubber for industrial purposes put an end to this situation. From the 1880s onwards officials ordered the regular tapping of rubber, which was abundantly available in the wild and which

the Congolese used only in the domestic sphere. Within the space of a few years and over a very extensive area, coerced collection of the coagulated sap of jungle liana had become the principal source of income, a method of taxation levied on the people in compensation for the costs involved in their incorporation into the Congo Free State. Concession companies were set up and were granted the right to harvest this newly discovered jungle product in the areas allocated to them. Leopold II had shares in this form of enterprise, and also set aside a large area as crown property, whose yield was entirely for his own benefit.

Officials also profited from this colonial production. Their efforts in collecting the levy were rewarded with a bonus inversely proportional to the expense involved: the lower the cost, the higher their commission. Compensation paid to the rubber tappers consequently represented only a fraction of the price brought by a kilo of rubber on the European market.

Colonial literature on Africa uses the term '*mise en valeur*' to refer to the exploitation of regions such as the Congo. This so-called valorization, i.e. realization of the country's economic potential, was achieved by forcing the local people to provide their labour. Although the supply of rubber had priority in the Congo, it was by no means the only obligation laid upon the people. To provide the authorities and military with food, to supply large-scale transport services, to implement public works and other unpaid demands on the productive ability of the Congolese were said to be in reciprocation for the peace, order and civilization brought by colonial rule. By refraining from introducing a financial taxation system, the authorities ensured that the people were only able to meet the obligations laid upon them by working for and on orders of the state.

The colonial doctrine was that this had an educational effect. Forced labour was thought to cause internalization of the economic impulse on which social progress was based, a trait said to be entirely lacking among the Congolese. It was not until 1903 that the scale of forced labour became legally regulated. Prior to that date its severity had fluctuated in accordance with local circumstances and the officials' differing ideas of what was reasonable. The inhabitants of rubber-extraction districts bore the heaviest burden. The following quotation illustrates the way in which the new economic regime was introduced:

> That village has never supplied anything to the whites, and they refuse to come to the post notwithstanding repeated summonses. On 30 December at four o'clock in the morning I therefore went to Bosu-Kele with a squad of twenty-eight soldiers. At seven we gained easy entry to the village because

> everyone had gone into hiding. While a stockade was being put up, I had one of the men call to the village head that I had not come to fight with them but to negotiate, and to ask whether his people were prepared to harvest the rubber. He declared publicly that he would never work for white men and that it was thus unnecessary to talk with him. Then I ordered the attack. The Congolese resisted. Fifteen men were killed and we took three prisoners. At twelve-thirty I ordered the men to muster and then left for Kugele, a three-hour march north east of Bosu-Kele.
>
> The next day I returned to Kutu. I had only been at the post a few minutes when I was told that the headman of Bosu-Kele wished to speak with me.... The headman formally promised to deliver his rubber levy, i.e. 70 kilos per month. With peace thus concluded, the prisoners were returned to him. (Quoted in Delathuy 1988: 114-15)

Resistance often lasted longer than this and the soldiers took women and children hostage until the fugitives surrendered. After they had acknowledged *bula matari*, i.e. white man's authority, the next step was to consolidate the agreement. Armed African supervisors moved into the villages with orders to ensure the regular supply of rubber. The amount of this tax in kind was not standardized and varied from 5 to 10 kilos per male adult per month in the different zones. The tax was based on the number of huts, but this was only roughly estimated when a village was first occupied. The local headman was made responsible for delivering the collective levy. In practice, the supervisors could distribute the burden among households as they thought fit, as long as the stipulated quantity was delivered. Rubber harvesting immediately took up a large part of the villagers' working hours, even more once they were forced to penetrate deeper into the jungle to tap new trees far distant from their village; moreover, the journey to the post where the rubber had to be delivered was often long and time-consuming. All this meant that they had only a few days each month in which to provide for their own needs.

> To sum up the lives of the natives in a few words, I would say that they generally worked for twenty-four days per month simply to meet the tax levied upon them. Their existence in the rubber forest was most wretched. They led the lives of animals, fleeing from any approaching white man and with hardly any shelter for the night. In the Kwawa area they built rough cages for protection against wild beasts. Nevertheless, Mr. Samain, the business manager of Kwawa, told me that some of his harvesters had been killed by leopards, and I myself saw the body of a victim in the forest. The agents claimed – quite incorrectly I can assure

Figure 6.2. The punishment with the *chicotte* (hippopotamus whip). Photo by Alice Seeley Harris. Source: W.R., *The Congo Atrocities: A Lecture to Accompany a Series of 60 Photographic Slides for the Optical Lantern*, 1909, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Esclave_fouett%C3%A9_avec_une_chicotte,_%C3%89tat_ind%C3%A9pendant_du_Congo.jpg.

> you – that the blacks were sluggards who spent their time loafing about in the forest. (Quoted in Delathuy 1988: 125)

As a result of the rapidly increasing demand for the new product new areas were continually being opened up and quotas were raised in areas already under exploitation. Since government agents and concession companies were paid a bonus, these were only too willing to comply with orders issued from above.

The occupation of villages was accompanied by looting, arson, the destruction of crops, rape, torture and murder. But after this initial wave of terror things did not improve. The day on which the rubber had to be delivered, usually twice per month, was dreaded by the Congolese. From miles around they brought their harvest to the post, where white men with guns in their hands were waiting for them. According to one source, these occasions seldom concluded without acts of violence.

> Whenever the natives bring rubber to a post they are met by an agent guarded by soldiers. The baskets are weighed; if they do not contain the

> required 5 kilos, the man is immediately rewarded with a hundred strokes of the *chicotte*. Baskets that do contain the necessary weight are paid for with a length of cloth or with some other object. If there are a hundred men in a village and only fifty of them report with rubber, then these are held hostage while soldiers are sent to shoot the other fifty and to burn the entire village. (Quoted in Delathuy 1989: 529)

Both the African guards and the white heads of posts used the *chicotte* without restraint. This was a whip made of hippopotamus hide. A prescribed maximum of twenty-five lashes might be given each day as a disciplinary measure. In fact, punishment usually went on much longer, sometimes resulting in the death of the victim. A government post was always equipped with a stockade in which people taken at will from surrounding villages were detained until their kinfolk met their rubber quotas. Women who were taken hostage were used by the soldiers for sexual and other personal services, mendaciously said to be in accord with the customs of the country. Prisoners were forced to provide for their own subsistence and could not rely on food being supplied by the heads of posts:

> Each morning, as the prisoners came outside, many of them, at least thirty, were incapable of working and even of walking. The sick were mostly women, mothers with children, who spent the morning sitting on the ground in front of the prison in the hope that someone would give them a few bananas. They were all very emaciated, and it was obvious that many would die. (Quoted in Delathuy 1988: 99)

Maltreatment went beyond corporal punishment and detention. Headmen who were called to account were tortured, sometimes to death, in order to instil fear into their refractory subjects. People selected indiscriminately were shot dead for the same reason. The African guards, called *sentris*, conducted a reign of terror in the villages. Evn though they lived among the people, they were even more cruel than their white masters. They were guilty of cannibalism, stole, appropriated women whenever they felt so inclined, acted as judge and jury, and caned or tortured anyone who aroused their displeasure.

Couldn't the Africans complain about the arbitrariness and injustice to which they were exposed? Those who did so were said to be recalcitrant and were rewarded with even greater punishment. The only way by which people living in a rubber district could escape the regime imposed upon them was to flee. The colonial authorities anticipated that possibility, and

prohibited Congolese from leaving their villages. The army was responsible for arresting 'fugitives', i.e. all who were found away from the village without valid reason, and for bringing them back. By way of punishment, or in the interests of economic exploitation, the authorities could also decide to move people to another district. Protests against such deportation and the displacement of perhaps entire villages were fruitless. The leaders of the Congo Free State not only prescribed compulsory labour, but dictated how and where it was to he provided.

The people naturally showed resistance, and turned against the hated *sentris* first. The degree to which this occurred can be gleaned from a report by a concession company in 1905, which stated that not less than 142 of its *sentris* had been killed or wounded in a seven-month period. The military were deployed to put an end to acts of disobedience, particularly work refusal and rebelliousness. Concession companies could hire a squad of the colonial army to restore law and order in their region with great severity.

> Kayombo was the next major Lobo headman whose turn it was. He was caught in a swamp where he had hidden among the reeds. He was hung from a palm tree by his feet. A fire was lit under him and he was slowly roasted to death.... Then Katoro, a very important headman who lived at the tip of west and east Lubala, was attacked. Shots were fired at random into the people and fifteen were killed, including four women and a baby at its mother's breast. Their heads were cut off and brought to the duty officer, who sent the men back to sever the hands as well; these were pierced, strung together and dried over the fire. Together with many others, I saw the heads.... Hundreds of people were taken prisoner, mostly old and young women, and three new lines were formed of prisoners who were bound together by ropes.... Those rows were of skeletons of skin and bones, and when I saw them the bodies had been horribly slashed with the *chicotte*. (Quoted in Delathuy 1988: 59)

A story spread about one notorious district officer to the effect that he had a record number of 1,308 hands brought to him in one day. Those who tried to flee were shot dead, infants were beaten against the ground until their heads were smashed, pregnant women had their stomachs ripped open. Prisoners were crucified and left in the hot sun without food or water 'to dry out'. Parents who escaped into the jungle deserted their children, for fear that their crying would betray them. One fleeing mother had to put her little boy down for a moment. The guard who was chasing her 'saw that the child wore copper rings on his arms and ankles. He cut off

an arm and a foot and seized the ornaments' (quoted in Delathuy 1988: 213). A boy of eight or nine was ordered to cut off the hand of an old man who had been shot down. But the man was not yet dead and, according to a witness, tried to pull his hand back when he felt the knife. The boy, afraid of being murdered himself, managed to do as he had been ordered (Massoz 1989: 471).

Amputated hands are a recurring theme in tales of the time. A missionary reported how he had one day seen a prau, a type of sailboat, with sixteen amputated hands fastened to its bow. Another had seen hands caught in the branches of trees overhanging the riverbanks. His African companion told him that they were only a few of the many that had been thrown into the river by the basketful. Congolese who returned to their villages after the soldiers had departed became acquainted with white civilization in the following manner:

> We saw corpses, and on the outside of the palisade surrounding the house of the headman we saw seven male genitals hanging from a liana of about two metres long, fixed to two poles about six feet high. I have never seen such a spectacle anywhere else, and to my knowledge the people of my region, even when fighting one another, are not in the habit of mutilating corpses in such a way. (Quoted in Massoz 1989: 135)

Are we to deduce from this brief summary, which is indicative and illustrative rather than exhaustive and systematic, that the entire colonial administration, from high to low, was guilty of such bestial practices? It seems that only a handful dared to take a stand against them. Information that was not meant to be made public was in fact provided by a few officials who, on being questioned, were not reluctant to express their abhorrence of what had taken place under white rule. Far from denying the evidence or keeping silent, they grasped the opportunity offered by their appearance before the committee of inquiry appointed in 1904 (see below) to provide details of abuses that were known to them. A frequent reaction, however, was to say that the African soldiers and village guards were the principal or even sole perpetrators of the evil. This version was based on the contention that men of the colonial militia, the Force Publique, had been liberated from slavery. Was it then not only natural that they should try to take revenge for what they themselves had suffered? This reasoning could not be applied to the *sentris* because many of these belonged to the district where they were employed. But was that not convincing proof that the blacks did not hesitate to turn against their own people? Stories about men, women and children

being slaughtered, roasted and eaten, were all grist to the argumentation that, when white leadership was lacking, the black would succumb to his animal urges.

According to this reasoning, the cause of the indescribable cruelty was principally the African environment itself. The *sentris* were said to be a necessary evil. Those who took this position depicted the African guards as paragons of energy amidst a shiftless population. This also applied to the army of mercenaries who, led by white officers, pacified the rubber-producing districts and, in doing so, had to deal with savages who gave free rein to their lowest cravings.

> It is true that our soldiers were guilty of excesses. They mutilated the bodies of the enemy, whose right hands they hacked off in accordance with native custom. Although such barbaric practices cannot be excused, it must be said that they were nothing when compared with the horrendous cruelty of the natives, who tortured their white and black captives before killing them and using them for their cannibalistic feasts. (Quoted in Massoz 1989: 163)

Officially the ranks of the colonial army comprised men who had been liberated from slavery in which they had already been kept before. Former allies in regions situated in the eastern and northern borders who blocked the territorial expansion of the Congo Free State were now said to be slave traders. This made it possible for military campaigns to be presented as crusades organized in the name of civilized humanity. Payment of a premium for each 'liberation' was intended as inducement to end the barbaric conditions pertaining in the interior. But this humanitarian guise concealed the exact opposite, i.e. the forced employment of young men by the state, whether as soldier or labourer. 'Liberation' was a euphemism for a mixture of kidnapping, exploitation of prisoners and 'runaways', requisitioning of inhabitants of newly subjugated regions, holding hostage recalcitrant rubber tappers or their kin, tribal heads handing over under duress (with or without receiving payment) to the colonial authorities contingents of their subjects, etc. All such categories were recruited into government service for a seven-year period. Some of the people who were thus 'liberated' became soldiers in the Force Publique. The others were gathered into a workers' pool, to be used in constructing railroads and other public works. In a few terse sentences Joseph Conrad gives a vivid description of the miserable circumstances under which they worked and, inevitably, died.

> Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path. They walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets full of earth on their heads, and the clink kept time with their footsteps. Black rags were wound round their loins, and the short ends behind waggled to and fro like tails. I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope; each had an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking.... They passed me within six inches, without a glance, with that complete, deathlike indifference of unhappy savages.... They were dying slowly – it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now – nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest. These moribund shapes were free as air – and nearly as thin. (Conrad 1985: 42-44)

This powerful portrait of the wretched work animals conveys more than a multitude of facts and figures. Anyway, such quantified data are conspicuous by their absence in colonial records.

One category in which the state showed particular interest was that of young children, whether liberated slaves or orphans. After a bonus had been paid to their 'liberators', they were sent to school colonies led by missionaries. They remained under state control until the age of twenty-five, the intention being that the state would thus have a sizable and trustworthy corps of soldiers and workers at its disposal.

No age limit was attached to the use of forced labour, with the result that even very young children were included in the labour process. One official who protested against such practices was reprimanded by his superior:

> In Leopoldstad, in particular, I had to approve the employment of a group of boys of four to five years of age, 'recruited' for the coffee factory in Kinshasa against the will of their parents. I wrote to the king's attorney that I would no longer use my position for operations of such obviously illegal nature. The director of justice replied that I would thus disadvantage those children who wished to work. (Massoz 1989: 30)

In the eyes of the white governors, one could never start disciplining the Congolese soon enough.

The royal committee of inquiry: Its creation, mission and results

The reign of terror that held sway in large areas of the Congo region did not go unnoticed, and reports slowly made their way to Europe. From their posts in the rubber districts, missionaries wrote home about the atrocities to which the peoples were exposed. A few of such stories reached the media. On his own initiative, an employee of a Liverpool enterprise which traded with Black Africa, Mr. E.D. Morel, started to show a discerning interest in the colonial administration of the Congo Free State. His work enabled him to observe that the value of Congo's imports (his particular department) far exceeded that of its exports. Shipments of great quantities of arms to that country caused him to deduce not only that the people received little or nothing for their labour, but also that rubber tapping was based on the use offered. Several years were to pass, however, before Morel was convinced that his suspicions were accurate.

In Belgium, occasional tales about outrages in the Congo made little impression. The 1897 Congo Exhibition, held in Tervuren's Palace of the Colonies, accorded better with the popular image of Leopold's overseas activities. One exhibit showed a 'civilized' African village, populated by children under the care of missionaries, who demonstrated their skills in needlework and embroidery. An art display depicted the contrast between past and future: polygamy versus the family, ancestor worship versus religion, slavery versus freedom, and barbarity versus civilization. When accusations of outrages continued to be heard, Leopold responded by appointing a Committee for the Protection of Natives, which took no action

In Great Britain an anti-Leopold campaign gradually got underway, with Morel as its key figure. In a series of articles published in 1900, Morel drew the attention of a wider public to the Congo scandal. Roger Casement, who had spent many years in Africa, became his major ally. In 1901 Casement was appointed British Consul to the Congo Free State. This took him back to a country which he had known in earlier times, and where he had met Joseph Conrad during the latter's stay in that part of Africa in the early 1890s. At the turn of the century, Conrad published his bleak remembrances of the Congo region in *Heart of Darkness* (1902). His British friend Casement had told him stories the like of which, he said, he had never heard before, did not want to hear, and wished to forget as quickly as possible (Watts 1969: 149).

In 1903, on London's instructions, Casement journeyed to the upper reaches of the Congo River to report on the conditions of the people living in the rubber-producing areas – an assignment that he himself had repeatedly urged should be carried out. His diary of that journey formed the basis of

the very detailed report which he submitted on his return to London. The principal motif of that report was the staggering population decrease that he had found in the central part of the Congo. As few other visitors, he was able to compare past and present because the places that he now found to be deserted or in a wretched condition were the same that, fifteen years earlier, he had seen as densely populated and flourishing. Consul Casement unequivocally attributed this deterioration to the labour system and the use of force which formed the basis on which wild rubber was exploited. He was shocked by the many stories missionaries and government officials told him about amputation of the hands of dead Congolese, sometimes in fact even before they had died.

Back in London, the consul sought immediate contact with Morel who soon after set up the Congo Reform Association (CRA), with financial aid provided by his new friend. The CRA's objective was to halt Leopold's reign of terror in his African possessions by mobilizing public opinion in Great Britain and in Europe. The British Foreign Office had so far adopted a reticent attitude, conscious of anti-British sentiments in Belgium which grew as criticisms of the Congo increased, particularly in the British press. When the House of Commons in 1904 debated Casement's report, bringing immediate fame to the author, such restraint was no longer feasible. In response to increasing foreign pressure, the Belgian monarch intimated that he considered setting up a judicial inquiry. In the end, having been lured into making such a commitment, he could do nothing other than to appoint a committee charged with establishing the truth about the accusations of improper and inhuman practices in the Congo State.

The committee had three members: a Belgian lawyer as chairman, a Swiss barrister, and an Italian who had earlier been an examining magistrate in Boma. Before leaving for the Congo, the Belgian members of the party (two official secretaries in addition to the chairman) were convinced that they would easily disprove the foreign accusations as being lies and defamations. The Italian initially also showed signs of holding a contrary opinion to that of Casement. Leopold II had reason to expect favourable results.

The committee embarked for the Congo in September 1904, for a trip that was to last six months. On arrival in the colony the group started its work by compiling data made available by the government apparatus, and by questioning magistrates and attorneys. They then travelled into the interior to examine witnesses, both white and black. Against a tropical backdrop, the committee members in their robes of office listened to a long litany of atrocities related by, or on behalf of, the victims. The records that were preserved of this mise en scène read like the script of a Fellini film:

> The court sat on the deck of the steamboat, in a large space between two cabins. The chairman wore a purple toga with lace bands, Baron Nisco wore a black toga with white bands, and the Swiss member was in morning suit. Soldiers armed with rifles and bayonets were posted at either side. The court was dignified and impressive. (Quoted in Delathuy 1988: 103)

> A huit heures du matin, dans le frais vestibule du Poste, la Commission siège. Le Président est auguste dans sa robe rouge, Nisco a sa droite est charmant dans sa robe noire, Schumacher en habit est raide et compassé. A une petite table siègent Denyn, en substitut, et le sécretaire-interprète, en blanc-de-neige. Sur la verandah, douze soldats commandés par un sergent présentent les armes sur un signe du lieutenant Van Cutsem; car Auguste, l'interprète noir, ff. d'huissier, vient d'agiter sa clochette, le Président vient de prononcer: 'Messieurs, l'audience publique est ouverte.' (Stengers 1950: 701)

The committee followed the route taken by Casement, but allotted less time to it and did not go so far. The outcome was settled even before they started on the return journey to Belgium. The evidence that had been compiled endorsed Casement's opinion on all essential points. On their return to Belgium, in March 1905, the committee members had an immediate audience with the king at which they reported orally on their findings. Another six months were to pass before the authorities of the Congo Free State yielded to pressure to publish those findings. The decision to do so, however reluctantly made, had become inevitable. In the intervening months some of the evidence, particularly that of British missionaries, had come to the knowledge of Morel, who naturally did not hesitate to inform the public. The final version of the committee's report was a compromise to which all members ultimately agreed. Shortly before its publication in November 1905, the Belgian monarch attempted to mitigate its effect by circulating a press résumé in which his colonial enterprise was commended rather than criticised. This inept attempt to delude the media was counterproductive. The countless official files and appendages on which the committee had based its opinion were kept confidential and safely stored away, and later applications to inspect them were invariably rejected. The information that was divulged, however, was more than sufficient to refute the favourable image of his Congolese rule to which the Belgian monarch tenaciously adhered.

In an attempt to spare its royal patron, the committee started its report by praising the benefits brought by Western civilization to this part of Black

Africa. But this was followed by extensive discussion of the abuses that had been provoked by the colonial administration. It is a non-committal analysis with few concrete details, but it leaves the reader with the profound impression that the duress imposed on the people had degenerated into lawlessness; and that the manner of exploitation, although in the economic interests of shareholders in the Free State, was certainly not in the interests of the Congolese themselves. The subsequent debate in the Belgian parliament, held early in 1906, was under severe pressure from the criticisms that now predominated abroad. In 1908, as a result, possession of the colony was transferred from the king to the Belgian government. Leopold had great difficulty in accepting this decision. He procrastinated in the negotiations that preceded the annexation and demanded generous financial compensation for renouncing his possessions. At the moment of transfer, in an effort to prevent future historiography of the terror that had been enforced with his knowledge and approval, he ordered much of the Free State archives to be destroyed. He said literally: 'I will give them my Congo, but they do not have the right to know what I have done there' (Vangroenweghe 1985: 28).

The Belgians proved to have little interest in that past. Casement and Morel, who had brought the Congo scandal to light, were anything but popular. The public at large suspected, and increasingly so, that their view of the situation was biased and had deprived Leopold II of the credit that was due to him as an apostle of civilization. 'Retrospective and equitable satisfaction' is still the best description of the way in which most Belgians heard the news in 1916 that Roger Casement had been hanged by the British for attempting to gain German aid for the rebellion in Ireland. Towards the end of World War I, Morel's pacifist activities, construed in Belgium as treason, brought him a prison sentence. The idea that these slanderers had at last got their just deserts and that their punishment actually also signified vindication for Leopold II as colonizer, would be amended but cautiously by some of a later generation of historiographers. In spite of them, the work of Casement and Morel is still considered to be tainted with bias and exaggeration.

In my opinion, that is the prime reason why Stengers attaches so much value to the report of the committee of inquiry whose task it was to refute the claims of the two men. As early as 1950 an article of this leading colonial historian sets the tone for the long series of essays which he has since devoted to the Congo affair. Stengers's interpretation is that the committee of inquiry had struck a happy mean: on the one hand, it had corroborated that which the defending party, the Belgian monarch, had increasing difficulty in concealing; on the other hand, it had negated that which the

opposing party, Casement and Morel, had exaggerated from their biased viewpoint. The contrast that was thus constructed suggests an objectivity which stands or falls with appreciation of the quality of the report, whose content, and the still inaccessible data on which it was based, were not discussed. Notwithstanding its acknowledgement that large-scale abuses had occurred, the committee of inquiry had refuted both the information and the conclusions that played a major role in the charges made by Casement and Morel. Stengers endorsed the balance sheet as drawn up by the committee. In later publications he calls the idea that the brutal regime had been responsible for the decimated population numbers prior to and after the start of the twentieth century, a 'gross misrepresentation'. With regard to the amputation of hands, he continued to believe the version given in the official report. The evil lay, he argues, in killing people for the sake of obtaining rubber. He reiterates that it was only after a man had been killed that the soldiers severed one of his hands to justify the use of ammunition. But then how could he explain the photograph published in the foreign press of living victims who had thus been mutilated? Well, it sometimes happened that in his haste a soldier cut off a living man's hand, or that soldiers wasted their ammunition and had to account for its use. They were 'industrial accidents' of a sort – in other words, they were not always avoidable. But in Stengers's opinion, Morel and his friends went too far in giving the impression that mutilation was a standard form of torture, imposed in order to discipline a recalcitrant people. 'In face of the development of such a legend the Belgians may have had the right to talk of slander and to have felt outraged' (Louis and Stengers 1968: 249). Stengers explains that understandable anger and compassion had turned these activists into biased observers who, in relinquishing their detachment, had also sacrificed their power of critical judgement. Morel had shown more subtlety in an early publication by remarking, firstly, that atrocities had not been perpetrated everywhere in the Congo region; secondly, that such abominable practices had also occurred in parts of Africa under French or German domination; and thirdly, that exceptional circumstances, particularly the climate, had to be taken into consideration when judging the barbarous behaviour of a few whites. To see things in their right perspective, not only the abuses of the colonial enterprise should be stressed but also the many benefits that had been brought by Leopold's rule.

Stengers commends this sympathetic plea by the young Morel. The latter's transformation into prosecutor, a man overwhelmed by indignation and other emotions, had led to loss of nuance, impaired his ability to weigh right and wrong or advantages and disadvantages and had rendered him

incapable of arriving at objective conclusions. Stengers continues to respond resentfully to the contempt and vilification directed at Leopold II. As to the purely negative assessment of the monarch voiced by his foreign adversaries: they overstepped the mark, not only because their verdict offended the patriotic sentiments of many Belgians, but also because it wronged a man whose expert knowledge on colonial affairs should not be disputed, let alone tarnished. Moreover, it was an unfair judgement of a man who had so generously placed the profits from his African enterprise at the disposal of his country, enriching it with such monumental buildings as the arcade in the Jubelpark and the palace museum at Tervuren.

To contrast the suffering of the Congolese people with praise of Leopold II as 'the Builder King' ('Le Roi bâtisseur') seems to me a remarkable way of assessing history. But Stengers's premise is that historiography should be dispassionate and should make no allowance for moral sentiment. It is in terms of this attitude that he evaluates the Belgian monarch who, in his opinion, knew more than Morel about the state of affairs in the Congo. The thrust of the argument is that after a promising start Morel's journalistic work had taken a direction that made him unreliable as an observer and reporter of current affairs. A historiographer is obliged to weigh the pros and cons of a situation, and this presupposes neutrality and detachment. Contrary to Casement, who had immediately shown his scepticism of the committee's task, and Morel, who mistrusted its recommendations, Stengers is inclined to attach great value to the committee's work. Surely, from their position of neutrality its members had been able to write a thorough and well-considered report?

Stengers's work on the early years of Belgian colonial expansion is certainly no mere apologetics. In fact, his essays on conditions in the Congo at the turn of the century contrast favourably with the tone which most of his contemporaries adopted until recently in discussing this subject. The gist of his reasoning is that the biased reporting by Casement and Morel cannot stand up to criticism; as a result of the commotion that they had rightly caused, however, the appointment of a committee of inquiry became inevitable. This had reduced the Congo scandal to its true proportions (although these were bad enough, both in extent and seriousness); moreover, the committee's findings had opened the way for conversion of the Free State into a regular Belgian colony, together with reform of the economic regime, which guaranteed that further abuses would not occur. Half a century later, the mother country could look back with pride at the development of the Congo and its people, now progressing nicely (Stengers 1950: 703).

Stengers's thesis that colonial developers, under direct responsibility of the Belgian government, caused a fundamental change in the method of colonial

rule, seems to me debatable.My arguments for this will be presented in the next chapter. In this one, I restrict myself to events that occurred around the turn of the century and the manner in which these have been dealt with in colonial historiography. Recent publications justify the suspicion that abuses and crimes in the Congo Free State were not exposed properly in the report of the official committee of inquiry. To attribute maximum objectivity to the content of that report would be permissible only if it could be proved without a shadow of a doubt that the committee's judgement was reached on good grounds and without prejudice. In both respects, there is reason for serious doubt.

The need for revision

It is amazing how rapidly and easily recollections of the Congolese reign of terror seem to have disappeared from collective memory, at least in Belgium. Once the tempestuous debate early in the twentieth century subsided, later publicists paid little attention to the affair. If they did mention it, authors usually expressed their admiration for the initiator and their appreciation of the daring and dedication shown by the pioneers who occupied the Congo on behalf of the king of the Belgians and developed it with typical European, i.e. white, perseverance. The inaccuracy of this cherished image can be shown on the basis of recent publications by two Belgian authors: A.M. Delathuy and D. Vangroenweghe. The former is the pseudonym used by a high official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Brussels whose career started in what was then the Belgian Congo. Vangroenweghe carried out anthropological research in that country. The two authors based their first works, both published in 1985, on the classified documents and files which the committee of inquiry handed over to the colonial authorities after completing its report in 1905. Almost simultaneously, though independently, Delathuy and Vangroenweghe managed to gain access to these archives, in which the relevant files are still flagged: *ne pas communiquer aux chercheurs* (don't give access to researchers). In 1988, Delathuy, who within a short period wrote a number of books devoted to the same theme, published a selection of the secret documents in order to increase the accessibility of these primary sources. Reading through the raw material which has now become available one might expect these publications to have made a considerable impact in Belgium.

Delathuy told me that his interest was aroused when, as ambassador in a West African country, he saw a report that mentioned genocide in

early colonial Congo. When his request for information from Brussels went unanswered, he decided to verify the accuracy of the accusation and started to examine the relevant sources while on home leave. Vangroenweghe also writes in the preface to his book – the result of many years of extensive archival research at home and abroad – that he initially doubted the appalling facts that came to his notice and was inclined to underplay their significance. Only gradually did he begin to comprehend the true nature and extent of the outrages that had been inherent to the rubber regime. The author stresses that his narrative is not concerned with individual districts where the horrors were worse than elsewhere, or with the suffering and deaths of huge numbers of labourers who were forcibly put to work on railway construction. That which remains, however, is more than enough evidence for the correctness of his description of the Congo under Leopold II as an early concentration camp along the Equator.

There is an alarming discrepancy between the tone of detachment that the committee of inquiry tried to maintain in its report written in the early 1900s, and the evidence given by witnesses reported in those appendices which disappeared into the archives. The independence of the committee members who were given the royal assignment is not in question. If those members were selected on the assumption that they would bring out a favourable report, there is no evidence that they conceded to that implicit wish. Appraisals after the event, however, have made insufficient allowance for the disinclination shown by white officials to provide the committee with accurate and exhaustive information, or even to appear before it. Some simply did not respond to repeated summonses. Others left their post or reported absent when the committee came visiting, in order to avoid being questioned. One official let it be known that he must first ask his superior for advice before appearing as witness because he would unfortunately be compelled to report on orders that he had been given on how to wage war and to collect rubber. His thinly veiled threat was evidently effective, as he did not appear. Sixty years later, in the district where that official had behaved with extreme brutality, the people still remembered the horrors of the rubber regime, as Vangroenweghe found during his investigations.

Many officials lied when giving evidence, denying that they had been guilty of any atrocities, that they had given orders, or that they even knew about such crimes. One man, who later wrote an apology for having given false evidence, asked the committee not to demand that he should revoke his testimony in public. The majority of those questioned thought it sufficient merely to deny charges made against them by missionaries and native

African informants, or maintained that they had never known what crimes were committed in their name by soldiers and guards. The few who refused to hide behind this argument of *wir haben es nicht gewusst* (we didn't know) had to face the wrath of colleagues and superiors for bringing discredit to white authority and were subsequently dismissed from the colonial service. The intimidation meted out to Congolese witnesses was far more drastic. Advance pressure was brought to bear to prevent many victims or their surviving relatives from appearing before the committee. One man who did actually dare to complain had his wife taken away from him and given as concubine to his white master for four months. Another was given 200 lashes for his incriminating evidence, and then had to undergo indescribable torture during imprisonment.

In view of the opposition and sabotage encountered by the committee during its tour of inspection, it is remarkable that it managed to bring into the open so many crimes and enormities that were meant to remain concealed, and Morel quite rightly complimented the committee members for the scrupulousness with which they had done their work. To suggest, however, that they were able to assess the situation on the basis of knowledge of all relevant facts and viewpoints is to underestimate the incompleteness and unreliability of their information. The manner in which the inquiry was carried out meant that, at best, its findings approximated the terrible reality. The committee was undoubtedly handicapped by the fact that only one of its members had spent any time in equatorial Africa, as magistrate in the service of the Congo Free State. He was also the only one with any personal experience of the colonial milieu.

It is even more important, however, that another defect of the official report should be corrected. I refer to the prejudice shown by the committee in interpreting what they were told. Briefly, that prejudice amounted to an abhorrence of black peoples and to excessive sympathy for the difficult conditions under which the white bosses endeavoured to instil civilization into that inferior race. This attitude is typified by the tone taken in the introduction and conclusion of the report; moreover, as Delathuy correctly remarks, the intervening text is interlarded with comments regarding the indolence, improvidence, barbarity and mendacity of the Congolese. For these reasons, the testimony of Africans, however dignified and impressive their appearance before the committee, was given only brief mention in the official records and from the start was accorded little significance. If the black was not an arch-deceiver and a conjurer of fantasies, he had at any rate a quite different idea of the truth. On the other hand, the arrogance towards and revulsion for the Congolese which many government officials

showed in giving evidence, constantly reaffirmed the stereotype opinions that the committee members shared with the colonial elite.

Well-disposed officials who wanted to call a halt to the brutalization of the people were able to do very little because it would have cost them the trust and cooperation of their African personnel and of the local intermediaries without whom they were powerless. This ingenious representation of affairs would emphasize the goodwill felt by white officials, but at the same time justify the constraint that had to be exercised if chaos and a relapse into barbaric customs were to be avoided. The reasoning is negated, however, by evidence that officers encouraged their troops to commit atrocities and even paid them a bonus for doing so; conversely, the men were punished if they refused to obey orders. *Sentris* who were accused of murder, for instance, defended themselves with the plea that they were held responsible if rubber collections were insufficient. If supplies were too small, the shortfall had to be compensated with the hands of rubber tappers whom the *sentris* had to kill, for that very reason. It was really very simple. If they brutalized their victims they were rewarded; if they refused to do so they were flogged and sometimes killed themselves. The choice between two such extremes was an obvious one.

In brief, there is too much evidence to make it possible to absolve the whites from charges of atrocity. The conclusion is inescapable that the whites not only knew about such unpardonable offences against mankind, but that they frequently ordered them to be carried out and even committed them. The obvious answer to such allegations was that they indeed occurred, but only under singular circumstances and in exceptional cases. Justification can then always be found for any excesses. It was a repetition of the argument that the inhabitant's own behaviour motivated such brutality. During its tour, the committee of inquiry regularly heard such extenuating comments:

> I must tell you that the Uele natives generally have a proud nature, and that they accept the authority of the white man only with difficulty and reluctance. It is only since they have understood that the white man is more powerful (a fact of which they constantly have to be reminded) that they have decided to submit to his will, and this makes it essential that they should not be spared. It is my opinion even that government regulations regarding relations between whites and natives are too lenient towards the latter. (Quoted in Delathuy 1988: 93)

The tendency to negate, extenuate and mitigate ultimately concealed a distinct ruthlessness, an attitude which amounted to saying that the colonial

Figure 6.3. Display of the severed right hands of Bolenge and Lingomo, killed by Abir overseers in May 1904. Original caption: 'Natives of the Nsongo district (ABIR concession). With hands of two of their countrymen, Lingomo and Bolengo, murdered by rubber sentries in May 1904. The white men are Mr. Stannard and Mr. Harris, of the Congo Balolo Mission at Baringa.' Photograph by Alice Seeley Harris. Source: E.D. Morel, *King Leopold's Rule in Africa*, London, 1904/New York, 1905.

relationship was and must be based on the use of force. The application of European norms and standards of moderation and leniency could easily be misunderstood by the Congolese, who would see them as signs of weakness. This was the answer given to critics who found it objectionable, for instance, that women should be carried off into imprisonment. By equating the taking of a hostage with collateral to guarantee that obligations would be met, the impression was given that this method of ensuring the supply of rubber conformed to localcustom. When doubts were expressed about this piece of colonial logic, it was backed up by the succinct statement that imprisonment had proved a very effective method of ensuring that the intended results would be achieved, and that there was therefore no reason to desist from its use.

It was to Roger Casement's merit that his report extensively discussed the linkage between the atrocities he encountered during his tours of inspection and the system of forced labour. In his opinion, the cruelty was not incidental but was a logical consequence of the rubber regime. When it came to the crunch colonial authorities so accused replied both in private and in public: Well, so what?

> Even if it could be proved that the forced labour system, of all colonial systems, is one that most lends itself to improper usage; even if it could be shown that it is characterized by the highest figures of colonial criminality, it would still be approved and applied because it is necessary. (Quoted in Delathuy 1985: 420)

Brutality was excusable; moderation was not, because sloth would be its natural outcome. For example, one government official who had a favourable reputation among the Congolese was reprimanded because so far he had killed only one man. His superior advised him in future to use fewer words and more bullets.

Such instructions seem to have been typical of the policy of the Congo Free State. Those who campaigned against it have been accused of exaggeration and bias, which does not do justice to the reliability of their information and the depth of their analyses. The charge of prejudice made against them was, in part, caused by the way in which the committee of inquiry, set up in the early 1900s in the expectation that it would negate Casement's report, carried out its assignment.

The refusal to regard the state machinery as one of oppression led the royal committee into conflict with some of Casement's principal conclusions. The committee disagreed with Casement, for instance, on the reason for the depopulation of large parts of the country since it was first opened up (i.e. occupied). The committee did not attribute this to the destructive effects of the rubber regime but to the occurrence of epidemics. The collective weight of all other causes of death was of no account compared to the enormous number of victims claimed by smallpox and sleeping sickness. In an earlier essay, republished in a recent collection, Stengers emphatically agrees with the opinion of the committee: 'One has sometimes sought the main cause of this depopulation in abuses to which the inhabitants were prey in the era of Leopold II. That is a polemic point of view which is perfectly absurd' (Stengers 1989: 190).

The assessment made by the committee was proclaimed to be the only correct and admissible one and the contrary opinion was dismissed as polemic. Without further explanation, this method of debate, in which the deciding factor is appeal to authority rather than to argument, lacks conviction. The historian Jan Vansina weighs things differently. In his introduction to Vangroenweghe's book, he attributes the halving of the population between 1880 and 1920 to the nature of the colonial regime in combination with the large-scale epidemics that occurred during that period. In his opinion, it is quite possible that disease was able to claim such a multitude of victims

as a result of the disastrous economic conditions under which the people had to live. The rubber regime rendered people vulnerable to ailments that had never before achieved such magnitude. Vansina considers that there is no longer any good reason for disputing a direct linkage between colonial misrule and population decline in the period (see also Massoz 1989: 574-87). To evade forced labour and its accompanying horrors, countless people fled to districts that had not yet been opened up and, as the occupying troops marched into even these areas, finally escaped across the country's frontiers, much to the fury of the authorities.

> The difficulties that are inseparably linked with the organization of a frontier district are made almost insurmountable by the guile and passivity of the Yaka race, an elusive and cowardly people who feel no attachment to hearth and home and who disappear over the border on the slightest suspicion, at the smallest frown. (Quoted in Delathuy 1988: 157)

Like Casement, missionaries regularly reported that inhabitants of villages and market towns totalled only a fraction of their former numbers. Moreover, later observers noticed a surprisingly low percentage of children born in the years around the turn of the century, when the burden of rubber collection reached intolerable heights. According to one source, the people were despondent and constantly claimed that it would be better not to be born at all than to be born to harvest rubber. As happened under forced labour regimes elsewhere in the world, women aborted their babies, fearing what yet another new life would entail for them and their existing children. Finally, the fall in population has to be seen in connection with the wholesale massacres that took place. In this respect also, there is a noticeable difference of opinion between Casement and the committee of inquiry. Whereas the former stressed the systematic nature of the violence and stated that the cruellest practices formed an inextricable part of it, the committee tended to mitigate this and to attribute the undeniable atrocities primarily to the mercenaries who once in a while got out of hand. Stories told by tribal headmen who appeared before the committee and, with the aid of small sticks, calculated that hundreds of their people had been killed, were dismissed as implausible.

The contrast intensified on the theme of amputated hands. The official report noted with satisfaction that the whites had never mutilated live people, or caused them to be mutilated, as punishment for not complying with the labour obligations laid upon them by the state. Anyone who reads the secret papers now available, however, cannot but doubt the objectivity

of the committee. It is incontestable that the mutilations were due to the rubber regime. Amputated hands were usually threaded onto a stick and then smoked over a fire, to be exhibited as a warning to others. Congolese were killed en masse and their defaulting hands taken in compensation for their failure to tap sufficient rubber. No provision was made for the eventuality that men, women and children might survive such treatment. It is an astounding fact that the majority of Belgian colonial historians have persistently managed to distort the nature and scale of these inhuman practices for so long, notwithstanding the lively debate on the subject held abroad in the early years of the twentieth century. In Great Britain, public opinion had been deeply shocked by press photos of mutilated children and adults, and by the images that were projected onto screens at 'atrocity meetings'.

The argument that mutilation of killed enemies was a frequent occurrence in Central Africa and was tolerated by white officers who needed evidence from their men for each cartridge used, was spurious. Left unsaid but more to the point is that it is difficult to conceive of a more appropriate punishment for men who failed to deliver the prescribed amount of rubber than to amputate one of their hands. But even if the suggestion were true that this was an old custom – the sources are inconsistent in this respect – Leopold's henchmen can still be blamed for having made an everyday occurrence of such mutilation, irrespective of gender and age, a terror that was inscribed in the nature of the rubber regime.

Hands for rubber

Was the colonial regime of the Congo Free State guilty of exceptional and even supreme cruelty? It is tempting to answer in the affirmative; nevertheless, I hesitate to do so. Ten years after his stay in the Congo, and again in the position of British consul, Casement wrote an almost identical report about atrocities practiced by white traders against South American Indians whom they forced to collect rubber in the upper reaches of the Amazon. His Putumayo report, written in 1912, shows a striking resemblance to his description of the conditions he had encountered in the Congo region (see also Taussig 1987). But news emanating from other parts of Africa ruled by other European powers demonstrated that the blacks there, too, were treated by their white masters with brute force. Dependent on the atrocities and abuses that became public knowledge, German, French, British, Portuguese and Italian colonizers were depicted as the most merciless oppressors of the

African peoples. For that matter, we should certainly not gloss over what happened during Dutch colonialism elsewhere. An ordinance introduced in Suriname in 1839 was meant to encourage systematic hunts for runaway slaves. A premium of 10 guilders was offered for those who were killed, payable only if military or civil patrols brought back the victim's right hand. As in Africa this exhibit used to be barbecued over the fire in order to preserve it during the return to headquarters from the interior (Van Hoëvell 1854: vol. 2, 188).

Did the way in which Leopold II directed his colonial enterprise differ essentially from imperialist behaviour elsewhere in the 'Dark Continent' or in other parts of the world? Belgian public opinion asked this rhetorical question in response to accusations from abroad. The moral indictment stemming from the sincere indignation of such activists as Casement and Morel should also be seen in the context of interests motivated by a type of commercial imperialism which opposed unfree labour and the use of extra-economic force on principle (Cooper 1989: 748; Rich 1986: 35-37). In Great Britain, in particular, this powerful lobby aimed at replacing the state by the market as the major mechanism of labour control and appealed to public opinion, with moderate success. The restraint shown by the British government in pressing the authorities of the Congo Free State was certainly caused partly by the fear that too much fuss or impetuosity would provoke criticisms of its own behaviour against people in Africa and elsewhere. At least in the Congo under Belgian rule the rubber regime was brought to an end, while it continued unimpaired in French Equitorial Africa a few decades longer (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1972). To classify the various colonial regimes on a best/worst continuum would seem not only extremely contentious but also irrelevant and inadequate.

My argument will be based on the hypothesis that the lack of freedom that characterized colonial relations needs to be specified in terms of the forced labour on which this exploitive system was based. J. Rex has lumped the various modalities together:

> The basic fact about all of these forms of colonial exploitation is that they depend upon unfree labour, the labour of the peasant which is yielded in the surplus taken by the tax-farming company, the labour of the plantation slave or indentured worker, or the labour of the peasant subject to share-cropping, labour-service and taxation. There is no 'hidden secret' in this exploitation as under metropolitan capitalism. There is no pretence that the worker is free, no disguised exploitation through the relative surplus value which is accumulated by reducing the portion of

> the working day when the worker works for himself. The worker is unfree and yields absolute surplus value. This is the essence of colonial labour. (Rex 1982: 207)

Such bondage was ideologically justified by claiming that the 'native' was unwilling to work. In the absence of cash, labour services became the self-evident quid pro quo requisitioned by the colonial authority to ensure peace and order, but they also served a higher objective: to instil economic discipline into the Congolese population. The inherent laziness of the Congolese could only be overcome if they were subjected to the universal law of labour from which none might withdraw on pain of punishment. This doctrine was widely propagated throughout colonial Africa and accepted as part of the Christian civilizing mission. 'The laziness of coloured races is a kind of genetic burden' ('Die Arbeitsscheu der farbigen Rasse ist eine Art erblicher Belastung') runs the opening sentence of a book on the defects of the African peoples written for the general German public, which appeared in the series *Die katholische Heidenmission als Kulturträger* (Berg 1923-27). The objective of conversion to the true religion of civilization, it said, was to change the African inwardly in such a way that he would lose his prejudice against the value of labour. According to the author, to compel primitive people to work was certainly not unchristian if reasonably rewarded and applied under state control. Elsewhere I have pointed out that a similar reasoning was used when coolie ordinances with penal sanctions were introduced on the plantations of colonial Asia (Breman 1989).

The non-economic behaviour ascribed to colonized peoples meets the criteria considered by Rex to be the definitive components of racist policy: (a) a condition of excessive exploitation or coercion; (b) a relationship pattern based on division among groups such that inter-group movement by individuals is excluded; and (c) legitimizing of the system in deterministic, usually biological terms.

Racism, we know, is not restricted to colonial societies; in the latter, however, the factor of race became the supreme principle of social organization. In early colonial Congo, a conglomerate of tribal societies, racism was especially virulent. Among the white elite, both military officers and government officials expressed their repugnance and contempt of 'the natives' in the most extravagant terms. Their knowledge of country and people was extremely limited. When the committee of inquiry asked whether a study had ever been made of the Congolese structure and culture, the governor, as highest colonial authority, replied that the state personnel had neither the time nor the interest for such work. Knowledge of just one of the local

languages was the exception rather than the rule. Incidences of cannibalism were largely responsible for the label of barbarism used to indicate the low stage of social development. Anthropophagy seldom occurred, however, and then only in the case of a conquered enemy or of a slave on the death of a headman. This custom, which was attended by considerable ritual, was transformed in the imaginations of the colonial powerholders into a bloodthirsty orgy which made women and children follow their men on the warpath in order to feast on the victims. Human flesh was said to be so much part of the blacks' daily consumption that it was sold as any other food item, but then in live form. This slanderous idea was believed by many and caused the committee to express its horror of a society

> where one continually came across markets of human flesh, where the buyers indicated and branded the piece they wanted of the dead victim; where the funeral rites of village headmen were celebrated with terrible bloodbaths of slaves who were slaughtered, and of women who were buried alive; in this bleak and secretive part of the world, a state has been established and organized with amazing rapidity which will bring the benefits of civilization to Africa. (Quoted in Delathuy 1985: 392)

This was the important thing, of course: to sing the praises of a colonial government that had put an end to barbarity. Forceful action was said to be the only means by which the savage instincts of the primitive people could be curbed. Of course, the white pioneers who exerted themselves to this end could not expected to be immediately successful. Sometimes they were forced to fall back on the methods of the barbarians themselves – amputating the hands of dead Africans, for example – in order to implement their civilizing mission. Seen in this way, terror exercised from above took on the character of counter-terror, necessary in order to withstand people who lacked any degree of civilization. How could their primitive urges be curbed other than by force? It was a time-consuming business, but insiders could see decided improvement. The resolute tactics had been effective and they could look forward to the future with confidence. Naturally, the imposition of discipline should not give rise to unnecessary brutality. Where this did occur, it was a case of individual misconduct, perpetrated by rogues who had migrated to the colony because they lacked the qualities and education necessary for a successful career in the home country. They belonged to the scum and misfits who had been picked up in Antwerp and Brussels by the king's unscrupulous agents. Reasoning in this way made it possible to attribute any misdeeds to the fact that all

kinds of disreputable people had entered the colonial service as a result of careless recruitment.

In a much lighter category fell the black sheep who lacked sufficient strength of character to stand their ground in a barbaric environment. These were people who, when young, had been given responsibilities that they could not handle, who lived sometimes all 'alone' with no other European for hundreds of miles around and without the refining influence of a white female companion. Unaccustomed as they were to hold their own in the company of coloured people, they tended to slide down the ladder of civilization by adjusting themselves to the savage environment. Once they had lapsed in this fashion, they abandoned the sense of duty and the code of honour that were the norm for most white officials in the Congo Free State. The poor wretches lived in a twilight state which frequently caused them to commit suicide, or led to a complete nervous breakdown, after which they had to be sent back to Belgium. The portrait is fairly common in the colonial literature, in attempts to exonerate individual excesses.

Can the escalation of force via violence into terror be reduced to a mental pathological collapse which affected only a small part of the white community? 'Tropical madness' was the name given to this disease for which, according to many colonial reports, the climate was responsible. Before he altered his opinions, even Morel thought that this might have been the cause of the indescribable cruelty about which he read and heard at the start of his desk investigation.

> It is in a great measure to these climatic drawbacks that we owe these deplorable acts of ferocity on the part of Europeans to natives from which no white race is exempt, and which, when they do occur, make one almost doubt whether, after all, Africa would not be better off if left alone in all the blackness of her night, free alike of the missionary, the trader and the official. (Quoted in Stengers 1968: 239)

The prevailing opinion was that these environmental conditions, in conjunction with the absence of white women, could deteriorate into moral degradation. On the one hand, this might alienate the victim from reality; on the other hand, it might cause him to feel greater affinity with the environment in which he found himself. The loss of civilized feelings which caused those who underwent this process to revert to a twilight state affected the weaker intellects and less resolute characters – in other words, involved but a minority among the whites. Stengers and Vansina (1985) recommend research into the psychological effects of male loneliness and illness on

the behaviour of European pioneers in the Congo, and also a study of their socio-economic backgrounds. This recommendation seems to imply that these historians endorse the tropical madness syndrome which became a prominent feature of the colonial milieu in the Netherlands Indies as well. In an earlier publication, I argued that the disease was a manifestation of the racist nature of that society, and that it could not be understood merely by describing the form in which it appeared as deviant individual behaviour (Breman 1988).

It is not adequate, therefore, to depict the atrocities as 'incidents', temporary or even permanent transgressions by a handful of white men whose aberrations brought discredit to the good name of the whole apparatus. The terror was inherent in the nature of colonial exploitation, and the materials that have now been published clearly show that sensible government officials could change into monsters when pressed by their superiors to ensure an ever-increasing supply of rubber.

The average expatriate was convinced that the use of force was essential in the effort to internalize the discipline which formed the basis of the notorious *mise en valeur*. This ideological justification was only needed for external use, however. In colonial practice, the only important thing was the yield brought by economic exploitation. As the rubber became exhausted in those areas designated for its collection, the suffering of the population seemed to increase proportionally. One village head exclaimed to a visiting missionary in despair:

> White man, I am ashamed, I cannot give you a chicken for your dinner, or cassava for your men, I am ruined.... Tell the rubber agents that we cannot find any more rubber, that we will do any other possible work, but that the rubber is finished.... If the choice is between slaughter and rubber, then they must immediately come and liquidate us. (Quoted in Delathuy 1985: 353)

'The white man's war' was the way in which inhabitants of the region where Vangroenweghe did his anthropological research in 1975 described conditions at the start of the twentieth century. The memory lives on in a local saying that refers to the old days; *It was Sunday, people took rubber and hands to the government post.* The exercise of excessive violence seems to be linked inextricably with a mode of production that was extremely primitive even in comparison with a labour system based on slavery. The widely dispersed population lived on subsistence agriculture, the exploited forest commodity which had become valorized grew in distant and inaccessible places, and

white officials were very few in number – all of these factors prevented the exercise of close control over the work. Consequently, the transition to a more complex form of economic activity, which is preconditional for the introduction of a more restrained labour regime, was hampered. In early colonial Congo, 'instilling discipline' in rubber-growing districts could amount to nothing other than extermination of the population.

In a fascinating study on the encounter between Indians in the Upper Amazon region and terrorizing white rubber collectors early in the twentieth century, the anthropologist Michael Taussig objects to the interpretation given by Casement in his report. The latter posited that, as in the Congo, the use of excessive force was necessary to appropriate the labour power requiredan interpretation which places the economic motive before all else. Taussig objects to this, saying that the problem was not so much the scarcity of this production factor as the fact that the Indians simply did not want to work for white men. Taussig also disagrees with Casement's implicit argument that, in perpetrating atrocities, the white men's objective was to push down the price of labour to the lowest possible level; in other words, that the terror, too, originated in a purely economic rationality. Nevertheless, there is a well-known assumption which says that forced labour leads to the use of excessive violence for repressive and preventive purposes: in the first case to punish those who cannot or will not meet their obligations, and in the second case to intimidate the others. When asked the pertinent question of whether he made a habit of mutilating the people under his jurisdiction, one agent of the Congo Free State, with a particularly notorious reputation, defended himself as follows: 'If I had had the hands of living people amputated in order to punish them for not harvesting the rubber, then I would be a raving lunatic and a dangerous being who ought to be removed from society' (quoted in Delathuy 1988: 514).

This statement, made by a man who held the record with over 1,300 hands in one day, would not have changed Taussig's opinion. No, the nature of the atrocities and the scale on which they occurred caused this anthropologist to conclude, and rightly so in my opinion, that it is not sufficient to conceive of the rubber regime solely in terms of labour scarcity. Economic incentives and principles were not the only motivations for the behaviour of the white masters.

Although the atrocious treatment of the population arose mostly from the hunt for more and more rubber, the colonial officials also behaved with arbitrary cruelty in the non-economic sphere. One official, whose nickname alluded to the fact that Congolese might approach him only on bended knee, once had twelve women prisoners beheaded because he

found a leaf on the newly swept ground. On another occasion, when he hurt his foot against a stone, he had a child in the neighbouring village killed in order to teach the inhabitants that they should keep the roads in better condition. Punishment without any offence having been committed was considered quite normal. When going on tour, many officials took a few extra men with them, whose task it was to use the whip to 'encourage' the carriers or oarsmen, forced to provide their labour power. One informant recounted how all the boys at a government post, still infants, had been punished with fifty whiplashes because a few of them had dared to laugh. A troop of mercenaries massacred a number of Congolese even before the delivery date for their rubber had expired, causing a missionary to exclaim:

> If people have to be murdered for the sake of rubber, then why can't they restrict it to the men and leave the innocent women and children alone? In this case there were another three days before the rubber was to be delivered. The enclosed photograph shows the mourning father (Nsala) looking down at all that remains of his wife and young daughter (a hand and a foot of the little girl Boali). All other parts of their bodies had been roasted and eaten. (Quoted in Delathuy 1988: 216)

These and other tales make it quite clear that people were slaughtered not only by way of punishment, but that the carnage often deteriorated into an orgy. Sometimes so many people were killed that the survivors could not bury all the bodies. Perhaps they did not have the time to do so because rubber harvesting had priority. One informant counted thirty-six skulls and parts of even more skeletons just a few yards from the house in which he stayed when travelling through a rubber district. The villagers told him that many hundreds of bodies were buried in a communal grave nearby. One missionary wrote that he had seen such terrible things that he himself would welcome death. This lament is reminiscent of what Roger Casement is said to have told Joseph Conrad, horrors that the latter remembered as being nightmarish. Conrad's description of Leopold II as 'that gigantic and obscene imperialist animal' has to be understood against this background.

Terror: from means to end

> The demands made by the Antwerp agents are such that the native is unable to meet them. Partly under the influence of the climate, the isolation,

> perhaps bad health, they see the native as a rebel, a thief, whom they come to hate. (Quoted in Delathuy 1988: 124)

Hatred of the Congolese grew into an obsession for which the white masters sought an outlet in a reign of terror which, on the one hand, was intended to subjugate the Africans and, on the other hand, to create distance that illustrated the irreconcilability between the two worlds. The 'civilizing mission' in the Congo was implemented with naked and unadulterated racist sentiments: 'With perhaps one exception in a thousand, the black is a dirty brute, a wild animal, wherever he comes from' (Officer Toeback, diary fragment, Lower Congo, 1891, quoted in Delathuy 1985: 12).

> The gallows are put up. The rope has been tied too high. They lift the nigger and put the noose around his neck. The rope twists for a few minutes, then crack, the fellow is thrashing about on the ground. A shot in the neck, and it's finished. This time it didn't make the slightest impression on me! And that although I had turned white with horror when I saw the *chicotte* used for the first time. Africa has its points after all. I would now go into a fight as though I were going to a wedding. (Officer Briensse, diary fragment, Uele, 1895, quoted in Delathuy 1988: 13)

> You can only bring proper civilization with the aid of the bullet. I shall not see the end of all this.... [W]hat a disillusionment with all those negroes.... [W]hat a filthy race.... [S]ometimes I wonder how we shall come through it all. (Officer Vanholsbeek, diary fragment, Uele, 1894/95; quoted in Delathuy 1988: 14)

We know about these feelings of intense hatred – just a few lines chosen from among many – because those who felt them were not hesitant to say so. It is quite a different case with the counter-hatred among the population, which was undoubtedly also racist in character but had to remain more covert due to the climate of oppression.

Hatred was accompanied by a mixture of contempt, fear and envy which deprived the white man's behaviour of any sort of economic logic and transformed the use of terror from means to end. By treating the Congolese in bestial fashion it became natural to describe them as animals, and vice versa. The denial that the dominated race had any human qualities degraded the Africans into playthings. One Belgian agent used them as punchballs, and those on whom he exercised his boxing skills were recognizable by their cauliflower ears, broken noses, damaged eyes and other facial deformities.

Figure 6.4. A prisoner who has been made to walk with a severed leg around his neck. Source: Captain Guy Burrows and Edgar Canisius, *The Curse of Central Africa*, R.A. Everett & Co., 1903.

Another enjoyed having Congolese descend head-downwards from the tallest palm trees, wagering on their chances of getting down alive. Innocent passers-by were sometimes used by the white master for shooting targets, or might be tied together and thrown into the river in pairs for the same purpose: it was more difficult to hit the target if it was struggling in fast-flowing water.

The Congolese were thus forced to undergo such sadistic treatment not only as punishment for alleged offences, whether or not in the economic sphere, but could be exposed to it without any cause whatsoever. This also applied to the sexual perversities that are so conspicuous among the tales of atrocity. A Congolese woman who had deceived her master with his boy, had her body rubbed in with a sugary substance and was then tied to a tree; within two days she had been eaten alive by the termites thus attracted. A common method by which men were tortured to death was for their genitals to be smashed or wrenched off. Women were killed by having their vagina filled with clay or a stick driven into it. The head of one government post had the flowerbeds surrounding his house edged with skulls of people who had been killed on his orders (see also Conrad 1985: 96-97). Government

agents forced children into sexual intercourse, compelled men and women to commit incest, and ordered women prisoners to parade naked. To be forced to eat the excreta of white men was a minor punishment appended to other acts of physical violence. Part of the joy of sadism was of course to mortify the object, usually in the compulsory presence of spectators. A photograph included in a book of travel reminiscences written by a former officer of the colonial army who regretted what he had done in his professional life, shows a prisoner who was forced to wear a freshly amputated human leg around his neck (Burrows 1903).

It should be noted that the charge of inhumanity was turned not against the perpetrators but against their victims, a projection which expressed white repugnance of the oppressed, and intensified as well as justified a contempt which belonged to the essence of colonial racism. Abomination of the Congolese extended to the black mercenaries, who were used by the whites but whose behaviour was so savage that the civilizing mission seemed doomed from the start. Study of the sources that have now become available, however, makes one suspect that dismembering, the severing of hands, feet and genitals, together with the cannibalistic orgies in which colonial troops and African guards indulged while bringing 'law and order' to the people, was in fact behaviour to which they were incited by their European officers, in the same way that the *muchachos*, the mercenaries hired by the rubber traders in the Amazon region, were incited by their masters to commit acts of cannibalism (Taussig 1987: 124-26). In the Congo, too, the *sentris*, considered as the embodiment of cruelty, carried out orders issued by their white superiors and could themselves be given exemplary punishment if they showed insufficient dutifulness and obedience. The African who took on the task of *sentri* certainly became a bully, but was himself a victim, too.

Feelings of envy were not alien to negrophobia. Like Taussig, I dispute Casement's theory that the Congolese would have harvested the rubber without any force and its inherent terror, if the price paid for it had simply been increased. The realization that the inferior black did not react spontaneously and willingly to 'normal' economic impulses, that he lacked the self-discipline that ought to manifest itself in the voluntary supply of his labour, aroused puzzlement immediately followed by unbridled anger among his white masters. The *Gazette Coloniale* explained to its readers that unwillingness to work not only barred the Congolese savages from the road to civilization, but that this situation had to be changed rapidly if the morality of workers in the home country was not to be affected.

> The atrocity stories that are spread around originate in the fact that each white man who works in the Congo has to force the negro to provide his labour power. This necessity is unavoidable and all the laments in the world cannot change that situation. Those closet colonizers who deplore this state of affairs, implicitly proclaim the immortal right of the blacks to do absolutely nothing. We protest against this view. The idleness of the negro should not stop us in trying to overcome or to get round it. It is foolhardy to claim that the native should not be forced to provide his labour for the valorization of the country in which he lives. His unwillingness must not cause the non-utilization of the resources of that country.... Our own workers, who are forced to work for twelve hours or more each day on penalty of starvation, would find it very strange if they should accidentally learn of the absurd protection that some people would provide to the natives of the Congo. The law of work applies to the blacks as well as to ourselves. If they think they do not have to submit to it, we have the right and even the duty to force them to do so. (Quoted in Delathuy 1985: 57-58)

Finally, the use of brute force helped the colonial oppressors to discharge their fear of their victims, fear which boosted the spiral of terror, fear of elementary forces, of the overwhelming of the civilized by the savage, which formed the basic theme of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness.* But there was also the basic fear of the hatred which the whites, consciously or unconsciously, knew that the Africans felt for them and why. Only one European victim of a shipwreck on the Congo River was rescued, five others were killed. An old boatman gave the lead, resisting appeals from his sons who were more interested in a possible financial reward. When the old man was asked during his trial why he had done this, he replied simply: 'I wanted to kill a white man' (Massoz 1989: 503). An American black politician who visited the Congo Free State in 1890 wrote that the Congolese whom he met while touring the country were filled with deep hatred of the white rulers (Franklin 1985). In the case of the oppressed, such feelings were fused with contempt. This is illustrated by an army report that rioters in a rubber district called themselves *Va-huni*, i.e. 'despisers of all Europeans', to show their abhorrence of the alien oppressors (Delathuy 1988: 62). The silence maintained by the rebels when fighting colonial troops was very impressive; it was a form of discipline that had a demoralizing effect even on the white officers: 'during the combat which went on for three hours, the Yakoma did not utter a single cry. Their silence and their icy resolution were terrifying' (quoted in Vellut 1984: 697).

The irrationality of the terror applied on both sides, and caused the peoples to be horribly afraid of their oppressors. This can be seen from the names they gave individual whites with whom they came into contact – names that usually alluded to the atrocious behaviour of the white man.

Domination naturally caused subjugation, physical and mental. In one case it is known that a black, after receiving punishment for his rebelliousness, entered the employ of his torturer as *sentri.* A poignant illustration of African submission is the way in which people who were selected quite arbitrarily endured the punishment that the head of one government post made into a daily ritual.

> They leave the ranks and offer themselves, because if they made the least attempt to flee they would be brutally grabbed by the soldiers and hit in the face by the representative of *bula matari*, and the ration would be doubled. Trembling and terrified, they stretch themselves on the ground, face down, before the commanding officer and his lieutenants; two of their fellows, sometimes four, grab them by the feet and hands and rip off their loincloth. Then they are whipped by a black ensign with the tendon of a hippopotamus, called here a '*bullepees*' [bullwhip] but more flexible. The ensign is chosen from among the strongest men and is ordered to be energetic and ruthless. Each time the bully raises the *chicotte* a red stripe appears on the skin of the piteous wretch, who groans and squirms horribly even though he is securely tied down. The victim often spits blood, sometimes swoons; although the rules prescribe that the punishment should then be stopped, they usually go on; wounding and even mutilating, the *chicotte* callously continues twenty-five, often fifty times or more to slash the flesh of these martyrs of the most implacable and revolting tyrants who have ever dishonoured the name of mankind. As the first lashes fall, the wretches scream horribly, but this soon becomes a continual groan.
>
> Moreover, if the officer in command is not satisfied with the performance, he will profusely kick those who lie moaning and writhing on the ground. A few, and I have seen this myself, driven by a refinement of baseness, demand that their victims should respectfully give the military salute when they painfully come erect again. (Quoted in Delathuy 1988: 533-34)

Against the terror brought by the rubber regime, it is tempting to idealize the African society that had preceded it. Taussig accuses Casement of falling into this trap in his Putumayo report. To show the difference with the nightmarish situation in which the Amazon Indians found themselves,

Casement contrasted it with their original conditions, suggesting that they had led a happy existence like grown-up children. Such an idea would also be misplaced with regard to the peoples of the Congo. But equally absurd was the contrary view – to be found in the report of the committee of inquiry – which held that the Congolese felt no love of family, were prompted only by self-interest, that they neglected the weaker members of their society, and that they debased their women to little more than beasts of burden. This vilifying type-casting was supposed to excuse the cruelty exercised by government officials who were said repeatedly to be shocked by the demoralizing behaviour of 'the savage'.

Feelings on the other side of the colour line were rarely registered. '"*Bula Matari*, you want us to bring rubber, but how can we do that? We don't have hands any more" … and saying this they raised their stumps.' Thus noted a traveller in his diary (Jespersen 1980: 22). The white man does sometimes appear in colonial literature as a frightening figure, but without the imputation of the 'evil' said to characterize the 'authentic' aspects of African culture compassed about with rites and fetishes. A recent anthropological study which analyses the various forms and meanings of evil, devotes not a single word to the possibility that this could be anything other than a 'native category' or that the white man might perhaps be seen as the embodiment of evil by colonized peoples (Parkin 1985). The following interesting quotation makes it obvious that this was certainly the case in the Congo:

> European technological superiority and wealth was attributed to special, supernatural power; Europeans were sorcerers or magicians, theirs was an ill-gotten knowledge and wealth. Their prestige was ambivalent. Even the 'good' white man derived his power from some unethical unknown. In practice the Congolese never accepted European superiority. After resistance was broken they still did not accept the new order. (Stengers and Vansina 1985: 334)

In this context I would draw attention to the rumours that circulated among the Congolese during colonial rule to the effect that the cans of corned beef sold in the marketplace did not contain animal meat as shown by the wrapper, but human flesh taken from adults and children killed by the whites for this purpose. One source very interestingly spoke of 'chopped-up hands' which the whites put into cans, presenting people with this gruesome fare. Congolese paintings in naïve style showed the European boss looking on while his African helper handled the whip. The theme of the inevitable local auxiliary comes back also in popular stories of inverted cannibalism

committed by the *bula matari*, the white man. The moral of these frightful folk tales was in large measure an explanation for the prosperity of the foreign intruders:

> The origin of their affluence is suspect, because of the belief that Europeans captured and used the bodies and souls of negroes in order to make them produce material goods with occult methods which they kept secret. The Congo legends contain many allusions to the dark dealings with the realm of the dead and the invisible. (Vellut 1982: 114; cf. Ceyssens 1975)

A recurrent theme in many studies of colonialism is the internalization by conquered peoples of the racist opinions held about them by their conquerors. A certain degree of such psychological imposition is indeed possible, but it would be unwise to make any hasty judgement about this extremely complicated problem. Even the breaking of all resistance does not necessarily signify acceptance of the new order. Submission to the powerful whites, including acceptance of their racial superiority, seems to reach its absolute limit when the inferiority imposed on the African masses would suggest consent with their physical elimination as *Untermenschen*, or inferior people. The documents written at the beginning of this century which have been kept secret for so long, have little to say on this subject. In that respect, they reflect the social context within which they were drawn up. To correct this bias is the task of historiography of the colonial regime, which must not be confused with colonial historiography.

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7 Colonial Development

Rehabilitation of colonial rule, a comparative view

Pressure of public opinion abroad put an end to the private colonial enterprise of Leopold II of Belgium. The abolition of the Congo Free State was ultimately due to the continuous flow of information concerning scandals that were perpetrated there. The Belgian people remained convinced that these stories were strongly exaggerated. J. Stengers is one of the later colonial historiographers who is of the same opinion. He argues that E.D. Morel, as leader of the anti-Leopold campaign, had turned public opinion in Belgium against himself by carrying things too far; his stories of severed hands were exaggerations to the point that they bore no relation to reality. Stengers is prepared to call the theme of punitive mutilation 'a legend'. When professionals entrusted with the recording of colonial history express themselves in this way, it is hardly surprising that the horrors committed by Leopold's agents are swept aside in more popular writing on Belgium's presence in the Congo as nothing but a war of propaganda against the energetic royal pioneer. This, for example, is the tenor of H. Eynikel's *Onze Kongo: Portret van een koloniale samenleving* (Our Congo: Portrait of a colonial society), published only a few years ago. The author, perhaps inspired by the trauma of decolonization which is still a sensitive issue, pays tribute to the Belgian mission of civilization in Central Africa. The atrocities that were practised, if acknowledged at all, are explained in terms of crimes and customs not tolerated by the authorities. It took some time before this savagery was brought to an end. Agents of British and German imperialism exaggerated the nature and scale of excesses, underestimating and misrepresenting the positive results of infrastructural and institutional development achieved by the early pioneers, among whom King Leopold II was the prime hero (Eynikel 1983: 53-71).

This point of view is rebutted by the raw studies published by Delathuy and Vangroenweghe. I use the adjective 'raw' primarily because the innumerable oral testimonies and written statements from which they quote read like messages from a green hell: full of shock and horror. The publications are raw also in the sense of unadorned. Both authors have adopted a chronological framework and, understandably enough in this initial phase of revelation, are descriptive rather than analytic and explanatory. White actors play the central role, especially in Delathuy's book, and the Congolese come to the fore only as a mass of victims. These new studies link up with other publications

that take a more critical tone with regard to the early twentieth-century historiography of Zaire. In addition to Belgian authors (such as Massoz, Peemans, Vansina and Vellut), a number of foreign historians (Northrup, in particular) have contributed to the debate. None of these authors, however, had access to the archival sources that were opened up by Delathuy and Vangroenweghe.

How much impression was made by the works of these two authors? Very few reactions have yet been heard from the former colony. However, the present ruling clique of Zaire has made grateful use of the French edition of Vangroenweghe's book to dismiss as hypocritical Belgian criticism of objectionable conditions in their land. Mobutu apparently no longer feels honoured when his court officials extol him as a second Leopold II.

Delathuy's distressing disclosures have so far been ignored in Belgium – a silence which provides just as much food for thought as the indignation with which the publication of Vangroenweghe's book was greeted in some circles. The ex-colonial lobby immediately showed its displeasure. The publisher of the French edition was threatened with a lawsuit, and patriotic associations lodged a complaint against Vangroenweghe with the Ministry of Education. Had not this man, who earned his living as a teacher in an eminent *lycée*, cast a slur on the royal family by accusing Leopold II of terrible misdeeds, said to have been committed early in this century but long since refuted? In response to critical questions raised in the Belgian parliament in Autumn 1986, Vangroenweghe was ordered to appear before an official committee of inquiry. His interrogation, and also the information that was sought without his knowledge from colleagues and the director of his school, brought nothing to light that could be considered detrimental to the teaching profession. With this communication, meant to be reassuring, the minister made it known that he considered the affair closed. Meddling of this sort makes it understandable that a Belgian diplomat preferred to write his books under the pseudonym of Delathuy.

General Janssens, Belgium's last commander of the colonial army in the Congo, expressed his displeasure at Vangroenweghe's charges which he considered to be a mere repetition of the smear campaign pursued abroad earlier: nothing but lies and slander, proved fallacious long ago. But then, how did he explain the many photographs of Congolese with amputated hands which illustrated Mark Twain's book published in 1907, for example? Well, the answer is very simple. They were lepers, unfortunates whose limbs ultimately had to be amputated. Others acknowledged that the facts that had now come to light were indefensible, but held that they should be seen against the background of the times in which they occurred. European children,

too, had been forced to do slave-like labour in the late-nineteenth-century mines and mills, had they not? A comment in the leading daily *Libre Belgique* took a similar tack: Vangroenweghe was accused of passing a moral verdict without making allowances for the harsh ethos of the era.

It is tempting to suggest that the disclosure of the secret archives has at last shed light on a horrible state of affairs. The appendices to the report of the royal committee of inquiry which have become available only now are certainly an important source of information, but contain no sensational revelations. The publicity devoted to the rubber scandal at the beginning of this century was enormous. Joseph Conrad and Mark Twain are familiar names in this connection but also Sir Arthur Conan Doyle contributed to the ongoing debate with a pamphlet entitled, true to his literary style, *The Crime of the Congo* (1909).

Massoz, who in his analysis of the early colonial regime in the Congo could only rely on earlier publications, states in the foreword to his recent book that there are still many who would prefer to perpetuate the cocoon of deceptive but comfortable ignorance. He refers to an early ethnographer who, as long ago as 1912, wrote that it was better not to resurrect the scandals of the recent past. To publish his findings, Massoz realized, was to take the risk of being charged with lese-majesty and lack of patriotism. In his opinion, however, it is better to face such reproaches than to cooperate in suppressing facts that have long been known. Not everyone finds it so easy to cross the borderline between the pretention of ignorance and professed though uncomfortable knowledge. The climate is not favourable for listening to what really happened in the past. How can it be otherwise against the background of historiography in which racism is hardly mentioned and which has reduced the episode of amputated hands to a figment of the imagination? Vellut warned some years ago that this subject was still taboo in Belgium (1982: 70-71). His diagnosis seems to have lost little relevance. Stengers's latest book, in which he has assembled a number of earlier essays, is entitled *Congo's mythes et réalités* (1989). Nowhere in that book written in a truly king-and-country style, not even in the foreword, does he make any mention of recent critical publications regarding Leopold's early colonial reign of terror.

I certainly do not mean to imply that Belgian historiographers alone covered up colonial abuses in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. One finds a similar tendency when looking back on events in the same period under Dutch responsibility in what was then the Netherlands East Indies.

Reactions to the publication in 1987 of my *Koelies, planters en koloniale politiek* regarding the ruthless labour regime on Sumatra's East Coast

plantations at the turn of the century included embarrassment and irritation in addition to sentiments which expressed shock and anguish. A comparison of conditions in this Outer Province of the Netherlands Indies which had only recently been opened up, and the regime of Leopold II in the Congo region of Central Africa at roughly the same time, does not seem prima facie self-evident. The Free State, as constituted by the Belgian monarch, was an occupying power rather than an established colony. Racial divisions were certainly laid down, and in a particularly acute form, but by the time of its abolition in 1908 a civic society in a colonial format had attained only very imperfect form. Interaction between black and white was strongly antagonistic and can without exaggeration be said to have been in terms of warlike confrontation. The primitiveness of the colonial order was exemplified by the fact that economic exploitation was based on the collection of wild rubber. On Sumatra's East Coast the cultivation of export crops (tobacco first, and then rubber) was already taking place, based on an institutionalized set of relationships between coloured labour and white officials on large-scale plantations. The coolie ordinance with its penal sanctions regulated the recruitment and employment of men and women brought from other parts of Asia to these agro-industrial enclaves. Early in the twentieth century, the terror caused by this system of forced labour was the subject of an official inquiry. The classified results of that inquiry have been included in my book which is focused on this hushed-up chapter of Dutch expansion overseas.

In addition to profound dissimilarities between these two forms of colonial exploitation of labour, Sumatra and the Congo did have certain characteristics in common. These were to be found primarily in the racist ideology which justified the extra-economic force exercised in appropriating the labour power of African and Asiatic peoples for production for the world market.

An inquiry ordered by the governor-general of the Netherlands Indies in 1903 confirmed the suspicion of distressing and even horrifying abuses on the Sumatran plantations. The incriminating results, reported by a public prosecutor who conscientiously fulfilled a difficult task, were kept confidential and disappeared into the colonial archives. Unwillingness to revise accepted opinion in the light of new information amounts to a form of ignorance which Wertheim describes as escapism from reality (Wertheim 1975: 185). The rejection becomes total when both policymakers and public opinion refuse to take cognizance of inconvenient and disquieting facts.

After a review of my book in the Netherlands' newspaper , *NRC* (15 March 1987), one reader wondered if any scholarly interest was served by

raking up such abuses which happened such a long time ago. It would have been better if I had felt shame and had kept silent. An editorial comment in *Moesson* (Boekholt 1987), a magazine for the Indo-Dutch community in which the colonial past is usually discussed with undiluted nostalgia, showed a similar sentiment. Such censorious reprimands were relieved by more positive reactions, but also the reviews in a few professional journals did express a similar criticism of the style and substance of my book. While conceding that expansion of the plantation economy went hand in hand with misery and injustice for the workers, these reviewers expressed their doubts about the way in which, they said, I detracted from the epic of the founding fathers of the late-colonial enterprise. Is this non-historian, they asked, qualified to delve into the source material on which this book is based? More important, however, is the reproach that I have not taken into account sufficiently the circumstances of time and place. The most outspoken criticism of this nature was published in 1988 in *Itinerario*, a journal published by the Centre for the Study of European Expansion at the University of Leiden. The review article, written by V.J.H. Houben and entitled 'History and Morality: East Sumatran Incidents as Described by Jan Breman', criticizes both my presentation of the facts and the interpretation that I have given them. Whereas I have stressed the systematics of the use of force, Houben significantly prefers to speak of 'incidents'. In a more recent paper he repeats his reservations, accusing me of having created 'a black legend' (Houben 1994). On the basis of the report drawn up by the public prosecutor, this reviewer refutes my thesis that the brutalization of labour was of a racist character, insisting that usually the Asiatic foremen and not the European planters were guilty of maltreating the coolies until death resulted.

In using this argument, Houben reiterates a defence that is as old as the colonial plantations themselves. Minister of Colonies Idenburg used it when the 'coolie question' was debated in the Netherlands parliament at the end of 1904, as did many others before and after him who wanted to emphasize the civilizing effect of colonialism. Similarly, with respect to the Belgian Congo it was said that not the whites but primarily their local agents and mercenaries were responsible for the reign of terror under which African labour suffered during the rubber exploitation period.

Houben saves his most critical card last, i.e. that I have pronounced a moral rather than historical judgement. He warns his readers against the risk of being carried away by my emotive argumentation, and draws attention to my selective use of words: abuse, unlimited wielding of power, dehumanization, sexual sadism, excesses, etc. – terms which in his view

invalidate the scholarly quality of my study. I may perhaps have shocked present-day public opinion, but the tenor and conclusions of my study will have little impact in academic circles – according to Houben, that is. Significantly, the reviewer does not speak for himself, but reprimands me on behalf of his profession, even in the name of science at large. The reaction that I have provoked has its parallel in the renewed debate on what happened in colonial Congo around the turn of the century. Self-styled historians such as Vangroenweghe and Delathuy, who give access to disagreeable information, are accused of lack of objectivity, one of the most important rules of the scholarly game. Reproaches of moralism, emotionalism, subjectivism, etc., are often levelled against those who challenge the received wisdom and attempt to broaden the conventional discourse. They are said to have given insufficient consideration to the wider context. When that is discussed, however, particularly by those people who were on the receiving end of colonial rule or by those who try to construct analyses on a social consciousness that was kept alive on the other side of the colour fence, they are accused of creating legends and of believing their own fantasies. Casement's report, which signified the beginning of the end of Leopold's reign over the Congo, was published only after the Foreign Office in London had made stylistic editorial changes to its contents, 'because in some places its composition shows a lack of restraint'. Taussig, who reports this editorial streamlining, speaks of an objectivist fiction, meaning 'the contrived manner by which objectivity is created, and its profound dependence on the magic of style to make this trick of truth work' (Taussig 1987: 37). The myth, i.e. the white mission of civilization, is declared reality; conversely, the horrendous experiences of the Congolese people during that period are disposed of as 'the myth of the amputated hands'.

The close of the colonial era did not end this reversal of myth and reality. As a social scientist I have always been greatly interested in historiography. Frequently, the information that I gain from fieldwork in my role as contemporary researcher causes not only practical problems, but makes me doubt the validity, completeness, scope and reliability of the data that are thus compiled. Is the light I try to shed on social life sufficiently objective? At first sight, it seems that this problem can be avoided by retrospectively clarifying situations and processes on the basis of facts that are already known and recorded in archives, statistics and other historical sources. However, I am increasingly inclined to challenge the notion that scholarly assessment based on the systematic analysis of a completed course of events – i.e. trying to understand what really happened in the past by making use of all available information – ipso facto entails greater detachment and an absence of bias.

This re-evaluation has reconciled me with the limitations of contemporary methods and techniques of social scientific research which deal with the never-ending present, while I have also come to realize that to trace lines to the past is not necessarily easier than to predict the future. This comment is no plea for voluntarism, but is intended to suggest that to arrive at an opinion in retrospect is actually to face problems entirely similar to those encountered when the researcher tries to make sense of social reality here and now. Distance in time does not guarantee objectivity, nor is direct proximity necessarily the first step towards subjectivity. This was my point of departure when I sought an answer to why it was that colonial scandals that received so much attention early in the twentieth century, at least in the homeland, have rarely if ever been subjected to later study. They seem to have been removed almost deliberately from the research agenda as 'incidents' which, if given too much attention, were likely to distort the historical balance.

Reforms

A second mechanism that helped to keep the past in check was by transferring attention to improvements introduced after abuses were officially confirmed at the start of the twentieth century. According to this line of thought, the reforms that were then initiated marked the beginning of a new colonial policy, and they suggest a change for the better that has blurred the memory of earlier iniquities.

The abolition of the Free State as an enterprise managed by Leopold II, and the conversion of the Congo region into a Belgian colony, seems to imply that a turning point had been reached. No real change was effected in the system of rule, however. With very few exceptions, officials, officers and concession company agents went unpunished for their misdeeds. This negligence was all the more surprising since control over the population was entrusted to the same white elite who had implemented the reign of terror. Although the Belgian monarch had been dismissed, his machinery remained unimpaired. But surely a change of staff was the minimal condition for guaranteeing a better state of affairs in the future?

Morel thought so, but made no headway at all, and therefore felt there was little chance of real improvement in the lives of the Congolese people. Retrospectively, Stengers reproached the activist Morel for allowing himself to be carried away by his emotions. According to Stengers, there certainly was a change for the better, and he therefore concluded that the evil had

been rooted in the rubber regime itself and not in those who implemented it. To confirm his view, he refers to later reports that were said to illustrate the improvement. Almost half a century after the event, Stengers concluded that Belgium could look back at a remarkable achievement which had turned the Congo into a splendid colony (Stengers 1950: 703).

The plausibility of Stengers's statement needs to be tested on the basis of further evidence. The official stand taken that reforms had put an immediate end to abuses was undoubtedly lauded, but is difficult to accept at face value. The edict issued at the end of 1903 to limit forced labour services to a certain maximum, was accompanied by an order that this should not result in lower yields compared to previous years. The governor-general's order left no room for misunderstanding:

> You should note well that the application of the law on prestations [payments in money or services] should result, not only in maintaining the results of the previous years, but also in recording a constant increase in the resources of the Treasury. The receipts of one year, for a district, must not be less than those of the previous year; on the contrary, an increase must be aimed at. (Quoted in Northrup 1988: 55)

Statistics show that, initially, the quantity of rubber harvested in some areas continued to increase. Observers also established that practices that were now formally prohibited were still condoned, if not encouraged, although more carefully concealed from prying busybodies. Excesses, including torture, were reported year after year. The rubber regime did not really cease until about 1910 when the liana of more and more trees had been tapped to exhaustion, cut through in the effort to meet the unremitting demand. The progressive fall in yield was caused by over-exploitation which made the product increasingly difficult to find, rather than by moderation intended to spare the people. A contributing factor was that the colonial authorities lost interest in rubber when its profitability dropped sharply as a result of falling market prices. For the greater mass of the Congolese, however, cessation of the rubber tax did not necessarily imply any lightening of their heavy workload. There are, then, insufficient grounds for the assertion that transfer of the Congo to the Belgian state in itself signified a radical break with the past. But didn't direct Belgian rule at least put an end to the sufferings of the population?

In publications dealing with another colonial situation I have demonstrated that there is good reason to be sceptical of the common notion that the authorities, once their eyes had been opened to the true nature and

extent of conditions rightly qualified as disgraceful, would take forceful action to end them. The 'coolie question' on Sumatra's East Coast at the beginning of this century has been perceived and dealt with in the same conventional way (Breman 1987, 1988). The Dutch Minister of Colonies Idenburg refused to make public the shocking results of the official inquiry into inhuman treatment meted out to coolies on Sumatran plantations. But he was prepared to guarantee that his proposed reforms would prevent its continuation. His undertaking referred, in particular, to the institution of a labour inspectorate whose task would be to ensure compliance with contracted rights and duties, and to protect the workforce against arbitrary behaviour, deception and exploitation by the employers.

By and large, colonial historiography has not disputed that these corrective measures became effective. I am inclined, however, to tone down their significance and to credit them with only marginal effect. Colonial policymakers, after all, resolutely refused to repeal the coolie ordinance with its penal sanctions, i.e. the system of unfree labour on which the Sumatran plantation economy was based. In the absence of a labour ethos it was thought useful to retain coercive measures in the work contract. Unfree labour, an essential feature of colonial enterprise, continued to characterize the Netherlands Indies and, in as far as the Sumatran plantations were concerned, was accompanied by legal coercion. From the early twentieth century onwards, 'excesses', i.e. the maltreatment of workers extending to torture and death, were certainly more effectively contested. No real change occurred in relations between planter and coolie, however, owing to the government's refusal to abolish the threat of punishment that was an inherent part of the labour contract.

But surely improvements were made to the healthcare, housing and feeding of the workforce? Kamphues's study (1988) is essentially devoted to demonstrating such progress and his findings therefore cannot but contradict the conclusions drawn in my book. His data, at least if their validity and reliability are not questioned, seem irrefutable and evoke the familiar image of a real reversal in labour conditions soon after the turn of the century. I remain sceptical. In the eyes of his employer, the coolie was still little more than an animal in need of heavy-handed discipline. Some change in the use of labour did occur due to the transition to another phase of capitalist development, a theme to which I shall later return. The raise in the standard of working and living conditions for the plantation proletariat noted by Kamphues is due to that re-evaluation. But even then, it must be asked whether he has not exaggerated that improvement. The answer has to depend on the significance that one attributes to the principal source

on which the author has based his analysis, i.e. the reports of the Labour Inspectorate. According to Kamphues, this official agency fulfilled the task assigned to it when it was provisionally set up in 1904, namely, to ensure compliance with the regulations of the coolie ordinance and its penal sanctions. In practice, this meant first and for all that officials had to keep the plantation management in check. Kamphues considers that this caused the Inspectorate to become a major countervailing power to the planters' organizations. However, the fact that white managers felt hampered in their room for manoeuvre and were immensely annoyed by the prying eyes of officialdom should not be taken as meaning that the Inspectorate and its mere handful of inspectors was given or took the chance to prove its non-partisanship. Complaints of bias shown in favour of the workers, continually voiced by employers, are not sufficient evidence. My belief that the Labour Inspectorate colluded with rather than opposed plantation capitalism is justified partly by its announcement in 1922 that retention of the penal sanction in the coolie ordinance was still an absolute necessity. This remarkable point of view was supported by arguing that the disciplinary effect of coercion could not be done without and that, ultimately, the worker himself benefitted from it. As late as 1920, 95 per cent of the workforce on Sumatran plantations was still bound by a contract stipulating that they could not leave their masters. Unfree labour continued to characterize the plantation regime. It was this continuity which I had in mind when giving vent to my scepticism (Breman 1988). Moreover, how much reliance could be placed on inspection tours about which white plantation managers were informed in advance? This question became very relevant in 1926 when, independent of the Labour Inspectorate, 'serious abuses' (colonial jargon for terrorizing practices) came to light at a number of plantations. The subsequent decree that in future advance notice was not to be given of inspection visits brought an immediate increase in complaints about maltreatment, and the acknowledgement that earlier inspection reports had seriously understated such complaints. This seems to confirm my thesis that physical violence is a natural outcome of forced labour. In appreciating the improvement that was made, Kamphues completely ignores the racism which continued to riddle the plantation labour system. He could have found clues in the book by Ann Laura Stoler (1985), who has extensively studied the late-colonial period. Unfortunately, Kamphues makes no mention of this important source, with the exception of one footnote.

Amputated hands were no longer mentioned in sources concerned with the Belgian Congo, but that in no way implies that the use of force came to an end once it had become a regular colony. Coercion and even cruelty

decreased in frequency and in intensity, appearing as incidents rather than symptoms of a system of terror. Did this mean an overall improvement, a milder working climate, and the beginnings of legal security for the vulnerable inhabitants? In my opinion, this conclusion would be overly optimistic, and colonial practice offers little evidence for it.

In this connection I would refer to Northrup's recent work on the colonial labour regime in East Congo (1988). 'The Bad Beginning' is the expressive title of the chapter in which Northrup discusses the course and effects of Belgian rule in the first ten years after the Congo was handed over to the Belgian government. Pacification of the colonial domain continued, carried out by soldiers press-ganged from among the population. These recruits were transported with iron chains around their necks, the so-called *collier national*. What they lacked in intelligence and discipline was compensated for by natural abilities in which African soldiers were said to excel: sharp eyesight, finely tuned hearing, instinctive road sense and such animal-like qualities easily ascribed to jungle dwellers. Under the command of white officers, the Force Publique became a formidable colonial militia which brought 'peace and order' in the regular fashion to unsettled regions:

> We destroyed anything and everything and scorched all that came in our way. The mud huts with their decorations in red, yellow and black (oh irony!) were cut to pieces with axes. The plantains were uprooted. All was burnt to ashes. The heat was so intense that we had to flee. (Quoted in Eynikel 1983: 102)

The switch from taxation in kind to a cash levy brought little relief to the people. The extended range of the colonial authorities and their increased administrative efficacy actually meant a greater burden for a growing proportion of the population. The forced recruitment of labour for the construction of roads, railways and other public works continued to be the norm, as did the provision of food for personnel of the colonial state. Moreover, large numbers of bearers, including women and children, were assigned to transport goods. Employment in mines and other enclaves of capitalist production that were under direct Belgian rule was also usually forced, as is illustrated by the following quotation:

> A recruiter from the mines went around to each village chief accompanied by soldiers or the mines' own policemen, presented him with presents, and assigned him a quota of men (usually double the number needed since half normally deserted as soon as they could). The chief then rounded

> up those who he liked the least or feared or who were least able to resist and sent them to the administrative post tied together by the neck. From there they were sent on to the district headquarters in chains, which were removed just outside the town to escape the notice of the magistrate. Chiefs were paid ten francs for each recruit as well as presents for meeting their quotas. Chiefs failing to cooperate fully risked losing their positions or other punishments. (Northrup 1988: 99)

Tsjanga-tsjanga (The Crimp) was the name given by the population to Union Minière. Reports of raids and of the transport of batches of captured men and women, tied together by rope around their necks as had earlier been customary in slave transports, continued to be heard until the end of Belgian rule. On reaching the place where they were to be put to work, their abominable treatment continued. If their efforts were thought inadequate they were punished, varying from wage deductions to imprisonment and the whip. The mines were particularly notorious for brutal working conditions, causing protests and uprisings which repeatedly required police action and military intervention to restore order. Contemporary colonial lore alleged that the use of force was indispensable as long as the Africans, who were so attached to their own subsistence milieu, proved insensible to more modern incentives to make their labour power available. The same hypothesis was applied during World War I to justify the introduction of forced cropping in order to stimulate the production of food crops and later that of commercial crops. Right up until Zaire gained its independence, the peasants continued to be whipped if they refused to grow cotton. In 1928 an official report advocated that corporal punishment should be re-introduced for workers who evaded forced employment by deserting. The proposed measure was an attempt to reduce the gap between colonial law and colonial practice. Legal officials who tried to stop the habit to which employers took refuge of imposing illegal punishments, abated their zeal when they realized that their action was opposed rather than supported in higher echelons of government administration. Instead of identifying abuses, as they were ordered to do, authorities actually turned a blind eye to them. Slogans such as *apostulat du travail* and other ingenious jargon covered up practices that were downright coercive. It was always possible to plead ignorance, while denying inquisitive outsiders any information. Incriminating reports were not filed or disappeared from the files, an effective means of covering up any irregularities. The degree of change that was introduced in the later colonial period should not be overestimated, warns Northrup at the end of his thorough and well-documented study. Only if one's point of departure is

the situation of extreme want of freedom and the accompanying atrocities that prevailed at the beginning of the 1900s, could the situation thirty years later be described in terms of progress, thus Northrup's cautious conclusion. A more sober opinion of the beneficial effects of Belgian rule until the eve of World War II is hardly conceivable.

The fact that force gradually came to be exercised without the terror that had been inseparably linked to it indicates the transition, it seems to me, to a new phase of capitalist exploitation under colonial rule, one based on the valorization of country *and* people. It was thought possible to develop both the natural resources *and* the human material that belonged to the equipment of African society, and that increased quality of the human potential was actually preconditional to improved utilization of the natural wealth. The extreme version of racism emphasized the basic worthlessness of colonized peoples. The presumed impossibility of converting them into a valued commodity facilitated their destruction. A more liberal version gradually gained the upper hand, also based on the idea of African inferiority but confident that, thanks to the ameliorating effect of colonial domination, the virtue of industriousness would soon be accepted. This is the era of the *Noir, l'homme enfant* (the Black as man-child). A long and difficult road lay ahead no doubt, but the final result would be gratifying because it would bring the Congolese to a higher stage of civilization. Those who held such notions were proponents of the so-called ethical approach in colonial politics, which gained ground between 1900 and 1910.

Ethical policies combined with racism

The colour line observed in both the Belgian Congo and the Netherlands Indies made for social dualism, a bipolar constellation resulting in the domination of the weak segments by the powerful. The upper stratum consisted of a small white minority, but it formed a closed front and, in exercising its authority, capitalized on the differences that kept the masses divided among themselves. Contacts with the majority who belonged to what was defined as the inferior race were subjected to precise rules which presupposed the hierarchical nature of the encounter. The colour line was seldom trespassed and then only in a way that left no doubt as to the inequality of 'the natives', 'the coolies'. Terms like these, even more than inequality in itself, exuded feelings of denigration and abjection. Segmentation on the basis of racism also characterized the labour system in the late-colonial period, probably most rigidly in enclaves of capitalist

industry such as plantations and mines. Ann Laura Stoler (1985) has written an excellent analysis of conditions prevailing on the Sumatran plantations in the first half of the twentieth century. More recently, this anthropologist has further examined some aspects of her earlier study. She posits that racist ideology not only served to justify white domination and its continuation, but was also intended to ensure that Europeans stayed on the 'right' side of the dividing line (Stoler 1989). The boundary might be crossed only in a manner that put the hierarchic nature of the meeting first and foremost.

In undeniable contradiction to this code was the custom of planters cohabiting with coolie females. This remnant of bachelor life in the pioneering years later became institutionalized when managements of plantation companies with head offices in Europe prohibited their younger staff from marrying, arguing that the nature of the work precluded a normal family life (Lucas 1986). Concubinage as a solution to this problem met with increasing criticism, however, since it ran counter to the taboo on all social intercourse that breached the rule of separation between the races. Obviously the arrangement was not predicated on partnership between equals. The *njai* was merely a maid who could be exchanged for another, but that did not alter the fact that concubinage clearly contradicted the stylized formality, the avoidance or even antagonism that became the norm for social intercourse with the inferior race. An article published in 1911 typified the concubine as little better than a prostitute. Although pitying the ultimate fate of such women – thrown out and robbed of their children – this moralistic tale stressed their negative qualities such as laziness, intemperance, faithlessness and sloppiness:

> One would have to be blind not to see the concubines as they show themselves at public entertainments, in the company of their masters, riding in carriages or motorcars, welcomed in the company of young people; or not to notice the concubines who have been cast off, sorry creatures who have been discarded in favour of a younger or more beautiful woman; or those who serve two masters, one of whom is usually a coolie. Some Europeans do not scruple to play around with a colleague's concubine or with their servant's wife, or even with female contract workers. (*De Indische Gids* 1911: 327)

The writer of this heart-rending tale was herself a planter's wife who pleaded that more women of her race, the only women who could be worthy companions for the young whites, should be allowed to come to the colony. In her opinion, if deterioration of public morals was to be halted, concubinage would have to be done away with. Later, the marriage prohibition was

repealed in response to increasing pressure that racial intermingling should be counteracted by closing the white front.

In the Congo also, the habit of first-generation European males to take at least one *ménagère* (concubine) fell into disrepute when white women started to arrive at the beginning of this century. These men who proclaimed themselves *ébénistes*, colonial jargon for expatriates who kept a concubine, had to overcome their distaste for the bodily odour of African women. This was a much-discussed topic in racist parlance. Another handicap was the offspring of such an affair.

> Children of mixed blood created a problem from 1900 onwards. Some were successfully brought up in Belgium.... But when the small children grew into adolescents and reached the age of marriage, they wanted a white partner. They were then guilty of trespass and were immediately returned to Africa which to them was unknown territory. (Eynikel 1983: 85)

The colonial policy of segregation remained intact also in the home country. In the Congo the chastity of the weaker sex had to be protected against the risk that they would respond to the strong sexuality of the African. In colonial manuals the partners and daughters of white males were urged to avoid being too familiar with the servants and, even in the house, to dress decorously (Vellut 1982: 100).

Non-conformists who transgressed the rules of colonial apartheid or who, without actually identifying with 'the natives', were inclined to be flexible in applying the code of discrimination, or even to question the inferiority of the underling, aroused the hatred of other whites. The dominant race, nevertheless, continued to express doubts on the civilizing effect of its own presence. According to this line of reasoning, the weaker, baser element in the colonial milieu exercised a corruptive influence on the superior element:

> In climatic conditions which are a burden to him; in the midst of races in a different and lower stage of development; divorced from the influences which have produced him, from the moral and political environment from which he sprang, the white man does not in the end, in such circumstances, tend so much to raise the level of the races amongst whom he has made his unnatural home, as he tends himself to sink slowly to the level around him. (Quoted in Alatas 1977: 215)

Retreat into one's own circle, the importance attached to a partner in life who, to be equal, had to be white, formed a logical conclusion to such

Figure 7.1. The 'bachelor life' that the arrival of white women on the East Coast of Sumatra brought to an end. Source: Photo collection of Jan Breman.

arguments. The extreme racism that pervaded the plantation system also prevailed in the rest of the colony. Comments in the local press about 'coolie animals' who could only be kept in their place with the aid of heavy-handed treatment, and the striking similarity that, according to readers' letters published in newspapers, existed between Africans and monkeys, all showed unadulterated racial hatred (Breman 1988). People who protested against such qualifications were accused by militant guardians of the colour bar of being 'Javanese lovers' (in the Netherlands Indies) or 'negrophiles' (in the Belgian Congo).

Surely, though, such strident racism was little more than a rearguard action? That would, unfortunately, be an all too hasty conclusion. Concern about increasing racial tension, or in other words, white intolerance for expressions of growing ativeIndonesian self-awareness, caused Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands, in her throne speech in 1913, to call for positive respect among races. A so-called 'hate-sowing' article was added to the criminal code of the Netherlands Indies, which penalized the provoking of enmity and contempt among different ethnicities. Later, this article was principally used to suppress the increasingly popular nationalist movement

and its leaders. The mentality that prevailed at the top of the colonial system can be seen from the statement that the highest official was tempted into making in reply to ever-increasing pressure from the nationalist movement almost at the end of the colonial era: 'We have ruled here with whip and cane for the last three hundred years, and we shall do so for the next three hundred years' (quoted in Wesseling 1988b: 288).

It is indisputable that racism was not only formalized but also curbed during the ethical period in colonial politics. However, the paternalistic policy brought no change to the social segmentation on the basis of colour. Racism thus continued to be the cornerstone of the late-colonial system (Kennedy 1945; Wertheim 1949; Sartono 1988; Fasseur 1994). The 'native' was promoted from *Untermensch* (inferior person) to fellow man, still inferior but amenable to moral and intellectual improvement under white leadership. Pieter Brooshooft, one of the initial advocates of this civilizing formula for the Netherlands Indies, describes the development policy to be adopted as follows:

> To ensure this childish people … by means of regular and well-paid work, moderate and uniform taxation, protection against arbitrariness, wise adjudication and proper police care, a peaceful existence in which men can provide for themselves, for their wives and children, without being tempted to indulge in excesses that will make them dissatisfied with others and themselves, but also without their falling prey to unscrupulous extortioners or to their own badly paid headmen. (Quoted in Locher-Scholten 1981: 35-36)

Acknowledgement of at least the existence of a human potential for development necessitated a more profound knowledge of the colonized peoples than had previously been deemed sufficient. Change in the desired direction after all presupposed knowledge of the existing structural and cultural conditions. The excuse given by the Governor of the Congo Free State, on being questioned by the committee of inquiry in 1904, that the conduct of daily business left his officials with no time in which to familiarize themselves with local customs and institutions, barely concealed his unwillingness to permit that information to be compiled or to have any idea of its possible value. That sort of attitude was replaced by the conviction that the proposed development policies would be doomed to failure without prior knowledge of the African society. The institutes of colonial sciences set up in the early 1900s were a logical result of that growing awareness.

The Royal Colonial Institute in Amsterdam hired an anthropologist to study the physical and psychological characteristics of particular races.

Wesseling, who draws attention to this, quite rightly remarks that the assignment did not then have the sinister connotation that it was to acquire later (Wesseling 1988b: 50). Preoccupation with racial characteristics as the key to scientific classification nevertheless reflected the lack of interest in the ordering of colonial society along any other lines of social organization than ethnicity. Internal differences that kept the colonized peoples structurally divided, and which were certainly perceived, were dismissed in the need to depict 'the natives' as a more or less homogeneous collectivity. Colonial psychology affirmed the negative traits rulers uniformly ascribed to subjugated peoples. The terminology with which Kohlbrugge, a prominent analyst of the colonized mind, typified the spirit of the Javanese-Malayan peoples is nothing if not clear: little intelligence, suggestible, lacking in individualism, displaying slavish submissiveness and slow-wittedness (Kohlbrugge 1907: 29-50). Of course, Europeans sometimes behaved in a manner unsuited to members of the superior race. But these were exceptions to the rule, pathetic people who could not cope with the difficult conditions in which they found themselves and who sometimes lapsed into excesses caused by the *Tropenkoller* (tropical madness) from which they suffered. 'Amok', defined by *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (1983) as 'a murderous frenzy that occurs chiefly among Malays', on the other hand, is not said to be caused by any sort of illness but to be typical of the unstable emotions of 'the native'. This different elucidation of transgressions of the social code of proper conduct seems to me illustrative of the racism that was inherent to the colonial situation (Breman 1988: 33).

Such stereotyping, however, also hid class prejudice. A consequence of the fact that the whites increasingly came from lower social classes in the home country, according to such sentiments, was that the self-discipline that characterized middle-class behaviour no longer governed contacts with the colonizedpopulation. Following this line of thought, Europeans of a more proletarian background would succumb more easily to the lure of Congolese women, or would be guilty of excessive aggression and other kinds of behaviour that were reprehensible by the standards of the privileged class to which, as whites, they automatically belonged in the colony. The public prosecutor of Elisabethville warned in 1921 that the Belgian manual workers residing there were a compromising element for the other white settlers, because of their tendency to be too familiar with 'natives'. Another insider, however, observed that all colonials generally considered it important to maintain white respect and solidarity over against 'the blacks' (Vellut 1982: 97-98).

Irrespective of whether European staff were part of the official apparatus or employed by private industry, they seldom originated in levels below

that of the lower middle class in the home country; in the colony their managerial functions were accompanied by a lifestyle that clearly indicated the gap between them and the 'natives'. In her article mentioned above, Stoler refers to the lack of a white substratum in tropical colonies, not as an incidental circumstance but as the result of conscious policy. Although this effort was not always completely successful, the business of running a colony was unmistakably a middle-class prerogative.

> British, Dutch, and French colonial capitalists and state policymakers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries designed pay scales, housing, medical facilities, marriage restrictions, and labor contracts such that the colonial venture remained a middle-class phenomenon. (Stoler 1989: 150)

I find this conclusion significant also in view of the linkage between the middle-class morality that predominated among the white upper stratum, and the social Darwinist ideas that determined the social outlook of this class in Europe in roughly the same period. Colonial relations were founded on a racism that was strongly reminiscent of the denigrating and discriminating attitude held by the national elite with regard to their own working class. Moral inferiority, low intelligence, lack of discipline, unwillingness to work, and similar poor qualities that were attributed to the code of conduct of the proletariat and conditioned their social consciousness meant that efforts which their superiors naturally said they made to improve the lot of this substratum were just as perilous an undertaking as efforts to improve the welfare and well-being of the subordinated race. Syed Hussein Alatas, who draws attention to this similarity, adds that in the latter case contempt was felt for the entire race and not merely for one section of it. Racial divisiveness, then, provided yet another element to the contrast between capital and labour. According to Rex, as the development of colonial capitalism proceeded and the pillage of land and people made way for a more streamlined system of exploitation, the structure of subsaltern society also changed and ethnic stratification was gradually superseded by class stratification (Rex 1988: 71). Rex's carefully formulated conclusion does not change the fact that colonial imagery continued to reduce the dominated peoples to one uniform category. The recommendation made by the Belgian Royal Colonial Institute in 1931 not to allow certain films ('very often directed by Jews') to be shown in the Congo because they imperilled white prestige, did not exempt the *évoluées* (Vellut 1982: 99).

The hypothesis that in the Netherlands Indies the introduction of the Ethical Policy coincided with the emergence of 'the racial problem' is less speculative than it seems at first sight (Van der Wal 1986: 832). Policymakers emphatically denied that the division according to race laid down in the legislation and in government policy was racist, or that it was based on the principle of domination. On the contrary, the different rules resulted from the diverse social needs that gave each of the population groups its own identity (Kat Angelino 1931: vol. 2, 161-66). This was also the answer invariably given to protests from within the local milieu against application of the criterion of race in daily colonial life. Growing Indonesian self-awareness saw the retention of that criterion as having no other intention than discrimination. Van Vollenhoven, a theoretician of policies towards colonized peoples, did his best to explain that society could not, and must not, be organized on the basis of equal rights for all. He expressed the fear that to delete racial distinctions from legislation would result in the strong but small segment having to adapt to the weak but large one. Such adjustment to the Oriental climate would risk everything that had been achieved under Western leadership and, hence, could not even be said to be in the interests of further development of the population (Van der Wal 1986: 842).

Colonial dualism

Sentiments such as these, however carefully and paternalistically they may have been worded, evoked the image of 'the lazy native'. The Malaysian sociologist Alatas has commented on the background and manifestation of this stereotype. His study, surprisingly, makes no mention of the work of the colonial Dutch economist and policy adviser, Julius Boeke. In effect, Boeke's famous dualism theory provided scientific support for the allegation that Easterners lacked a work ethos. While Western *Homo economicus* allowed himself to be guided by a careful comparison of costs and benefits when attempting to satisfy unlimited wants, the *Homo socialis* who populated the East had very few needs which they satisfied immediately and spontaneously. The denial of the universal validity of Western economic maxims formed the essence of Boeke's dualism. On second thought, however, he seemed to consider the contrast to be less basic than he had originally insisted upon. When lecturing to an audience of Indonesian students in 1927, he granted that economic evolution in the Western sense was possible. On that occasion Boeke foresaw that a small and energetic vanguard (whose identity was not clarified), motivated by the desire for profit and

by needs which were by definition unlimited, would gradually, with the aid of responsible government intervention, succeed in leading the masses along on the road to development. This was an important turning point in Boeke's work because, in taking that position, he implied that his theory of social dualism was not based on racial inequality. A growing pessimism which was the outcome of later colonial developments ultimately caused this prominent economist-cum-policy adviser to defend the thesis that the dualism between mass and elite in Indonesian society was not of a momentary but of a permanent nature. In his opinion, the rural masses would remain imprisoned in conditions of poverty. This conclusion was accompanied by the recommendation that, rather than to stimulate modern needs which were market oriented, all attempts to improve living standards should cease and, instead, acquiescence should be proclaimed as a virtue. This prescription is certainly conservative and even reactionary, but in itself it is not rooted in a racist doctrine.

The fact that Boeke regularly reconsidered his earlier viewpoints and continually introduced subtle distinctions into his theoretical work and policy advice did not prevent the term 'dualism' from continuing to be charged with racism in everyday colonial rhetoric. Although Boeke's interpretation did not regard the lack of diligence, sobriety, regularity and foresight as vices, in the minds of the white upper stratum expressions of the Oriental mentality were invariably so qualified. In their introduction to a collection of Boeke's most important essays, accompanied by a number of responses written by his contemporaries, the editors drew attention to a sociological study in which the traits that Boeke considered as being characteristic of the confrontation between Western capitalism and Eastern indigenous economy were linked in roughly the same way (though described in different terms) as was the contrast between the middle-class lifestyle and cultural traits of unskilled workers in Dutch society (*Indonesian Economics* 1966: 25-26).

My principal interest is not with the theoretical tenability of such assumptions but with the social breeding ground in which they originated. Racial dualism and the propagation of the Ethical Policy went hand in hand (see also Sartono 1988: 127, 337). In colonial practice, Boeke's benign description of the 'non-economic mentality of Eastern man' reverted into a malignant version according to which the population lacked any sense of discipline which only great severity could instil in them. The lesson drawn from this theory was that it was justified to subject the colonized masses to the use of force because they would then learn the benefit and value of work. Boeke's dualism theory explained the inverse elasticity of supply and demand, i.e. increased wages caused decreased interest in performing wage labour and

vice versa, which, of course, was very much at odds with the logic on which the capitalist mode of production was founded. This, and the lack of any sense of discipline, was said to prove the inferior quality of the workforce, used as an excuse by colonial employers to prevent the transition to free labour and the introduction of a minimum wage level.

Colonial development policy in the Belgian Congo was of a similar nature. The predominant opinion was that the combination of direct and indirect pressure exercised over the people by government had stimulated them to work and had brought about an improvement in living standards that the Congolese would never have achieved if left to their own devices. In overcoming their lack of self-discipline, the colonial experience had shown the Congolese the way to a better future: 'The experience of colonization in the Belgian Congo and elsewhere shows that taxes are a powerful incentive to the natives to work, and contribute in this way to their progress' (quoted in Peemans 1975: 175).Louis Baeck's study, published a year before Congo's independence, is of similar purport. The author attributes the demographic stagnation that set in after Europeans had opened up the country to 'collective enervation' in reaction to the naked and brutal colonizing methods that were adopted in the pioneering period. However, this indirect reference to the destructive effects of the rubber regime had no consequences for Baeck's analysis of the subsequent process of social change. With some modifications, this Belgian economist agrees with Boeke's thesis of social dualism, which he interprets as the result of implanting a capitalist segment into a society that was still in a condition of complete barbarity. Here, too, his limited needs enabled 'the native' to sustain himself with little effort, a subsistence mentality which deprived him of any incentive to improve his standard of living. In the more highly developed capitalist growth pole, the demand for labour first brought its forced mobilization in the commercial sector. This subjugation gradually became converted into self-discipline through inuring himself to the regular rhythm of wage labour as, influenced by the greater range of consumer goods which became available, the originally static needs pattern of the population expanded as well. Stengers draws up the colonial balance in similar fashion, but puts greater emphasis on the force that was needed to compel the Congolese to provide their labour.

A typical colonial viewpoint held that this was the only way by which the Africans could be freed from their indolence. The Congolese apparently suffered a particularly intense and stubborn form of this disease, because in no other colony was agrarian coercion, said to have been introduced in their direct economic interest, applied on such a large-scale and long-term

basis (Stengers 1989: 208). First rice, then cotton were given government's particular attention. Did this scheme of forced cultivation – known as *travaux d'ordre éducatif* – achieve the desired result? In 1933, the proud inventor of the idea was able to announce that, thanks to this system, indolent peasants who refused to grow more than they required for their own maintenance had been changed into prosperous market producers. In his view, they had become so accustomed to selling their commodities that the end of forced crop cultivation could be anticipated, probably in twenty to thirty years (Northrup 1988: 147). In the 1950s, however, the transition to a free labour system was consigned to the distant future. Delathuy, the same author who has given himself the task of rewriting early colonial history, started his government career in the then Belgian Congo. When I met him in the autumn of 1989, he told me that he had been a fervent and proud colonialist who had found it quite natural that peasants who refused to grow cotton should have their minds changed with the aid of the whip – eight lashes until 1954, after that reduced to four. In fact, he himself had meted out this punishment with his wife waiting in the background to treat the wounds of the victims after their ordeal.

Why were the peasants so obstinate and why did they continue to resist what, in the eyes of the colonial master, was in their own self-interest? Long after the country became independent, an old headman had this to say:

> Thus the peasant agreed to plant cotton not because he could sell it at a profit but because the colonial authorities required it of him. The refractory were led off to prison or were subjected to the torture of the whips or else they had to pay heavy fines. It was not rare to see peasants who, wishing to escape cultivating cotton, first cooked the seeds before planting them in order to convince the colonialists that their soil was not suited to that crop. (Quoted in Northrup 1988: 144)

Official heavy-handedness became even more essential when labour had to be mobilized for public or private employment. Right up to the end of Belgian rule, the management of mining companies and other enterprises expected the authorities to help them find and bond workers, and they were outraged at the prospect of government intervention coming to an end. Was it not a well-established fact that the Africans refused to hire out their labour to others? Local headmen were rewarded or pressed to cooperate, and they assisted in the identification of workers to be taken away by recruiting agents. By the mid-1920s the need for labour had become so great that a real manhunt sometimes resulted, rifle in hand, with the

catch being carried off as though they were prisoners. In 1931 the people of one district rebelled against such practices; according to Stengers, this was the only serious riot against Belgian authority (Stengers 1989: 212). In making this claim, he ignores a wide variety of popular resistance movements against the regime, protests which repeatedly had to be put down by force of arms. The retention of a strong colonial army was essential if compliance with orders to work for the whites was to be enforced. The use of outright violence in recruitment campaigns was prohibited by law. If the Congolese, deterred by low wages and miserable working conditions, did not voluntarily report for public works, for example, the authorities were allowed to resort to illegal methods. In times of emergency such practices should be tolerated, was the tenor of a 1926 decree with which approval of the use of force was given at the highest level.

From the start, the colonial government had proven more interested in cheap than in free labour. In 1909 the deputy governor made it known that if the Congolese should work harder than expected and achieve more than their obligatory output, no bonus was to be paid above the customary minimal compensation: '[I]n rewarding voluntary labor at a rate above that of the tax, we would risk *artificially* raising the local salary rate and giving an *unjustified* increment to the products of native industry' (quoted in Northrup 1988: 79). *Mise en valeur* was achieved solely through tax levies or direct force, but emphatically not by raising labour costs and improving working conditions. The reason given for keeping the wage level low was that Africans would only make an effort to earn money that they wanted for a specific purpose. As soon as this was satisfied they desisted from wage labour, so ran a frequent complaint. Known as the phenomenon of the 'target worker', this stereotype was to be revived in economic literature on development problems in the postcolonial era. This behaviour of instant consumption and the reluctance to defer gratifications of wants was said by colonial officials and employers to prove that the Africans were not yet imbued with economic motivation. In 1922 the governor-general urged his subordinates in the government apparatus to appoint themselves as apostles of labour, 'not of a haphazard labor which is content with paying taxes, but a persevering labor, which is the basis of all prosperity, development and civilization' (quoted in Stengers 1989: 133).

That a work ethos was gradually becoming internalized could apparently be determined from the growing number of men and women who, voluntarily, began to seek work in the enclaves of capitalist production. Colonial observers took no notice of the fact, however, that this new labour supply was largely due to migration from the countryside where forced cultivation and

corvée labour deprived the people of any freedom of choice. A pass system was introduced which, until independence, regulated the mobility as well as the immobility of people. Various methods of extra-economic force continued to be used, whether legal or not, in order to meet the ever-growing demand for workers said to be engaged in the country's economic development. In fact, this balance of interests amounted to preferential treatment for foreign capital at the cost of local labour. Far from helping to realize a free labour market, official policy delayed or even obstructed such a transition. According to official thinking, however, the crux of the problem lay not in the nature of state intervention but in the people's non-economic disposition, which was due to racially determined deficiencies. The African continued to be inferior, but nevertheless could be brought to development under white leadership. To fulfil this task in a responsible manner, indefinite continuation of the superior-subordinate relationship, inherent to the colonial situation, was imperative. As a result of the colonizer's understandable tendency to take his own good intentions for granted, the terror that had earlier accompanied the exploitation of the country and its people, faded or even disappeared entirely from his memory. But the colonized peoples were never freed of that nightmare. This became apparent during World War II, when the loss of rubber plantations in Southeast Asia prompted the allied powers to urge that the gathering of rubber as jungle product should again be taken in hand.

> When the order was passed on to the native population on behalf of the Belgian government in London, a wave of terror and horror went through this equatorial forest. The people's memory of the terrible rubber regime of the Congo Free State was still too vivid. In the years since, the horrible events of the old days had very often been resurrected around the evening fire, so that everyone, including the youth, felt as though they had personally been involved. And now, the horror that they had thought belonged forever to the past, had returned to the country. (Hulstaert 1983: 581)

The past was not forgotten because it had been kept alive.

Development policy: colonial and postcolonial

On 30 June 1960, the day on which the Congo became independent, King Baudouin of Belgium addressed his former subjects in Leopoldville. The great work that had been started by the genius of King Leopold and continued by the Belgian state, he said, had now been completed.

> For the last eighty years Belgium has sent its best sons to your soil, first to liberate the Congo Basin from the odious slave traffic which decimated its peoples, then to bring together ethnicities that, although previously hostile to one another, now prepared themselves to constitute the largest of the independent states of Africa; finally, to establish a happier life in the various regions of the Congo which you represent here, united in the same parliament. (Quoted in Stengers 1989: 266)

Baudouin told his audience that his illustrious predecessor had come to the Congo not as a conqueror but as one who brought civilization. Laying the foundation of a society so energetically begun under the leadership of Leopold II had resulted in a physical and institutional infrastructure that was indispensable for a country on the road to development. After summing up all the good things that colonial rule had accomplished, the Belgian monarch ended his speech appealing to the leaders of the new state: 'It is now up to you, gentlemen, to show that you are worthy of our confidence.' Patrice Lumumba's reply was spontaneous and in a manner not laid down in the protocol. Among other things, he said:

> Fighters for independence who today celebrate victory. No Congolese worthy of the name must ever forget that we have won by struggle, at the cost of tears, fire and blood. But it was a noble and justified fight which had become unavoidable if the humiliating slavery that we had been forced to suffer was to be brought to an end. What we have endured during eighty years of colonial regime has inflicted wounds that are still too fresh and grievous to be eliminated immediately from our memory.
>
> We have experienced harassing work, extorted in exchange for money that was not sufficient to allow us to still our hunger, nor to clothe and house ourselves decently, nor to educate our precious children.
>
> We have had to undergo ironies, insults and blows, morning, noon and night, because we were negroes. Who will forget that a black was called '*tu*', certainly not as a friend but because the honorific '*vous*' was reserved only for whites.
>
> We have experienced the plunder of our lands in the name of so-called legal documents which recognized only that might is right.
>
> We have experienced that law is never the same for a white and for a black; accommodative for the one, cruel and inhuman for the other.
>
> Finally, who will forget the shots that killed so many of our brothers, the jails into which those who did not want to submit to an unjust regime

> characterized by oppression and exploitation were brutally thrown. (Quoted in Stengers 1989: 268)

The Belgian dignitaries showed themselves to be shocked and offended by the style and content of this unexpected response concerning the recent past. Lumumba did not even refer to the horrors of the rubber regime, undoubtedly because they were outside his own horizon. It was only with difficulty that the Belgian king and his retinue of courtiers and politicians could be dissuaded from showing their displeasure by an immediate return to their own country (Vangroenweghe 1985: 7). A greater contrast in assessing the colonial heritage was hardly conceivable. But as Stengers has rightly commented, the issue was not a difference in historical interpretation, but a confrontation between two myths. On the one hand, the image of the benevolent colonizers who had brought the country to civilization and prosperity; on the other hand, the image of the colonized peoples as victims. Both arose, according to Stengers, from a psychological need: among the former to give themselves a sense of gratification and pride; among the latter to exorcise the humiliation that they had been forced to suffer. He concludes that historical evidence can actually be marshalled in support of both myths, but that facts seem to favour the Belgian over the Congolese image of the past. Stengers obviously sympathizes with the first version, even going so far as to attribute the greater accuracy to the view of the colonial rulers (expressed by Baudouin) and to reject that of the dominated peoples (expressed by Lumumba) as pure fiction. Disclaiming the latter's speech, Stengers suggested that

> he invented, for the sake of greater glory, a struggle made up of 'tears, fire and blood'. The psychological needs of nationalism carried him to the fragile border of truth: the capture of independence, isn't that for a young nation a title of nobility which she cannot do without? (Stengers 1989: 269)

The manner in which this historian weighs the pros and cons of colonial policy is a logical consequence of the earlier discussion in his essay. He argues there that, in view of the conditions that the Belgians had found in this part of Africa, i.e. cannibalism and other barbaric customs, it was quite natural that the colonizers should see themselves as bringing civilization. In addition to stamping out unpardonable customs, their civilizing mission included advancement of the people's moral and material conditions. A statute dedicated to the memory of the Belgians who died for 'the colonial cause', unveiled in Brussels in 1921, aptly symbolized the legitimacy of foreign

rule: it shows a figure representing the African race, imploring Belgium to come and develop – an appeal which the shining white *Gestalt* graciously accepts (Vellut 1982: 96). Stengers endorses the favourable and laudatory opinion concerning accomplishments achieved in the late-colonial period. It was true that the reduction of the population by half during the first couple of decades would seem to indicate a real demographic catastrophe. That had been a quite unforeseeable result of the coming of the Europeans, which resulted in the spread of contagious diseases on a hitherto unknown scale. The Congo had suffered more from this calamity than most other African countries, but the devastating diseases had soon been rendered innocuous by the health services once these became operative (Stengers 1989: 190-91). Did not the medical care and services that were introduced illustrate the success of the civilization mission more than anything else? Even this conclusion, which seems so persuasive, needs critical re-examination. In an essay on the way in which sleeping sickness was brought under control, Lyons points out that the action taken by the authorities against this epidemic was in the nature of a military campaign (Lyons 1989). *La lutte* was the heroic name for attacking the foe which had to be isolated, cordoned off, contained and eliminated, a battle fought on the assumption that the people had to be controlled for their own safety. Doctors could ask the army for assistance when they examined the Congolese and also to effect their isolation. The result was that the search for victims sometimes became 'little more than manhunts' with people fleeing from the doctors more quickly than from the tax collectors. The fear was caused by the introduction of a *cordon sanitaire*, which implied complete isolation of the victims. Their detention in lazarets turned these institutions into veritable prisons which many inmates did not leave alive. Mortality rates were appalling, not less than one-third of the detainees. Another third became blind forever due to the side effects of the medicines used.

Africans were terrified of *la lutte* and the lazarets became popularly known as 'death camps'. Wild rumours circulated that the colonial officials were not only causing the disease, but were rounding up people to eat them (Lyons 1989: 111-12). This is yet another reference to inverted cannibalism which indicated the fear felt by the colonized peoples, this time the result of 'benign' government action. Colonial administration naturally explained that fear and the resistance to public healthcare as incomprehension of the benefits of Western civilization. The leap forwards under colonial rule had been in the economic sphere, in particular, a result of the *mise en valeur* which had benefitted not only foreign industry but the Congolese as well, according to Stengers (1989: 205). Of course, there was also a darker

side: the force that had to be used to ensure an adequate labour supply for Western capital, the wages that were kept low so as to guarantee profit for European enterprises. Government had done its best to keep the happy mean and, without becoming doctrinaire, had tried to prevent damage to either industrial or popular interest. The author's verdict seems to have been written for the home front: '[O]ne could say that the results achieved under Belgian colonial rule were, when all is said and done, among the most brilliant in the whole of Africa' (Stengers 1989: 190).

Drawn up in this way, the colonial account differs little from the self-satisfaction shown by the Belgian monarch on the eve of independence. It is a rendering which transforms colonial policy into what was to become known as development policy in the second half of the twentieth century. Seen from that point of view, the surprise and indignation shown by the Belgian visitors on hearing Lumumba's speech become understandable. The racism about which he spoke had received just as little attention in Belgian historiography as the terror exercised during the rubber campaign that had characterized an earlier phase of colonial exploitation.

The adaptation of judgements on the course and impact of colonial rule into terms of development policy has not been restricted to the Congo. Wesseling, a prominent historian of Dutch expansion overseas, has come forward with a disinterested appreciation of the development aspects that characterized colonialism, and it is not by chance that he speaks of de-mythologization in this respect (1988b: 253). The myth, which he contested in a series of earlier essays recently collected, is that colonial exploitation caused the underdevelopment of Asiatic and African peoples, or at least kept them imprisoned in a state of underdevelopment. Perhaps, suggests Wesseling, the problem of colonialism was a lack rather than an excess of exploitation. As an historian, he is well aware of the racist and social Darwinist ideas that formed part of the ideological equipment in the colonization of indigenous societies. The beginning of the twentieth century, however, saw the dawn of a new phase of colonial rule, known as the Ethical Policy, 'the white man's burden', or the '*la mission civilisatrice*'. From then on, government ensured that the interests of the peoples were given priority. *La mise en valeur des colonies Françaises* was the title under which the French minister of colonies published his programme for the overseas territories (Sarrant 1923). In Wesseling's view there was an obvious continuity between this form of colonialism and later development cooperation. He considers it fitting to designate government officials of that period as development workers *avant la lettre*, as they themselves are regularly in the habit of doing in their memoirs. The continuity is not only a matter of subjective experience,

but alludes also to the idealism shared by the present-day expert and his colonial counterpart, and is expressed in such concepts as a moral duty, solidarity, altruism, enlightened self-interest and so on. Starting from the concept of the development task as social engineering, Wesseling considers that the rift in the process of social transformation lies not in the actual moment of decolonization around the middle of the twentieth century but half a century earlier, i.e. at the start of modem colonization policies (Wesseling 1988b: 42-43).

This interpretation evidences a long-term perspective but it seems to me to show little empathy with the experience of those who formed the object of the policy: the colonized people for whom independence, which is quite different from decolonization, indeed represented a radical turning point. This is not meant to imply that I reject the idea of continuity, but rather that I am inclined to interpret it in a way contrary to that suggested by Wesseling. The deeply rooted mistrust of the 'native's' will and ability to make use of the outside development offer gives postcolonial policymaking towards many African and Asiatic countries the patronizing character that was so typical of late-colonial upliftment policies. The similarity has not escaped the notice of Alatas: 'The ideological elements have been transformed, and have assumed a new garb. The image of the indolent, dull, backward and treacherous native has changed into that of a dependent native requiring assistance to climb the ladder of progress' (Alatas 1977: 8).

Development, as I think of it in its exemplary sense, is not a process that changes a society from outside, gradually incorporating greater portions of the population in a dynamic process that replaces tradition by modernity. Much rather, I conceive of it as emancipation from a state of dependency, a process which, on the basis of their growing self-awareness, enables people to make higher demands on life, to command a better destiny. The idea still seems to persist that the greater majority of people in countries with coloured populations lack the traits needed to achieve emancipation by themselves. Decolonization does not necessarily lead to the disappearance of racism, which indicates that segmentation along racial lines can also occur in other societal contexts. Neither does division on the basis of race always refer to the contrast between a white elite and a coloured mass. Nevertheless, that type of social formation became significant on a global scale in the shape of colonial regimes. One could argue that the domination-subjugation relationship which gave that system its peculiar character in both the structural and cultural sense, is continued in what now passes for development cooperation between states and peoples. In

that sense, present-day racism cannot be seen in dissociation from ideas that took root in the colonial past.

I would call the presentation of colonial policy as development policy *avant la lettre* in many recent publications, often produced by colonial old hands, a convenient streamlining of the past. Those who disagree with the interpretation risk the reproach of applying standards derived from another time and place, and have to be careful in their choice of words in order to avoid being branded as unnecessarily polemic. The experience of the colonized peoples, in so far as it has been captured in a counter-image of development, is disposed of as mythology, and, by that token, as something that can henceforth be ignored. Is it correct to assume that this historical debate has remained a metropolitan preoccupation of which the colonized peoples are completely uninformed? Alatas is certain that this has been the case:

> The overwhelming majority of Southeast Asians are not aware that they have been the subject of discussion for centuries. The European colonial authors, administrators, priests and travellers wrote for a home audience. It was their own people they wished to convince of the laziness and backwardness of the natives. (Alatas 1977: 22)

This seems to me a very optimistic view which ignores the institutional entrenchment of racist prejudices in the colonized milieu. The achievement of independence put an end to the structural aspect but not necessarily to the cultural expression of the imposed inferiority. The Indian social psychologist Ashish Nandy has written a fascinating book entitled *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (1983) in which he analyses the effects of internalization. On the other, i.e. the 'safe' side of the colour line also, feelings of animosity seem to continue, although at a greater distance than in the colonial era. The conclusion that Rex appends to his contribution to an anthology on racism and colonialism is then understandable: '[T]his division between rich white and poor coloured and black nations may come to be the most important form of racism in the modern world' (Rex 1982: 21-2). European expansion not only cut off the colonizedpeoples from their own past, turning them into 'people without history', but it also hindered a process of autonomous transformation and deprived them of an open future. The historiography of colonialism can help to widen our perspectives in both directions. Study of the past thus possesses a high degree of topicality.

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8 Early Whistle-blowers on Belgian Colonialism

Driven to dissidence

Why was I looking forward to meeting Jules Marchal and why was I seeking contact with a writer who chose to remain anonymous? Because I wanted to hear from him personally about the regime of wild rubber in the Congo Free State in the time of Leopold II, which was the subject of much discussion in the Anglo-Saxon world around the turn of the twentieth century. I wanted to know more about this period of terror and the silence surrounding it that has been maintained so unyieldingly in the early accounts of Belgium's colonial history. I was curious about what had driven him to expose it and what the response had been to his findings. In 1987, I myself had published a study on the labour system at large-scale agricultural estates on the East Coast of Sumatra in the early twentieth century (Breman 1987). In the study, I described the reign of terror which the contracted army of coolies had been subjected to on the plantations. Intrinsic to the capitalist character of the late-colonial project was the extremely high degree of exploitation. But the primitive extraction which I found in the plantation belt on the East Coast of Sumatra in the Netherlands Indies early in the twentieth century not only degraded labour, but denied the human species of those who performed it. The absence of any form of compassion with the victims meant that there was no imperative need to heed appeals to shared humanity. At the public presentation of my study in March 1987, I gave a lecture in which I drew attention to the recently published work of Michael Taussig and his discussion of the Putumayo report brought out by Roger Casement in 1905. Casement's impressive chronicle of human rights violations was founded on evidence he had gathered during a stay in the Congo Free State preceding the publication of his report. This source led me to the detailed study by Jules Marchal of the horrendous rubber regime practiced in this and eventually to Marchal himself. My contribution to a workshop in June 1989 at the Centre for Asian Studies (CASA) in Amsterdam discussed the books published by Marchal as of that time. After the meeting, I spent the weekend at his home in Belgium. He had invited me in advance, saying that I should come to stay as we would need several days to exchange ideas on what preoccupied both of us: the colonial enterprise, earlier and later.

Having been awarded a PhD at the Catholic University of Leuven in 1948, Jules Marchal (1924-2003) became a civil servant in the Belgian Congo. That was the start of a colonial career which ended with him being appointed district commissioner. After independence, he continued to work as an adviser to the government of Zaire. His long and outstanding service – 'I was a proud colonial official', he told me, laughing – qualified him for a position in the Belgian diplomatic corps. He later represented his country as ambassador in Ghana, Sierra Leone and Liberia. While at his post in West Africa in the mid-1970s, he happened to read an article in a Liberian newspaper about the mass slaughter of the population of the Congo Free State at the end of the nineteenth century. The article mentioned almost in passing how this had cut the population by half, as if this gruesome act was already widely known among the general public. Jules was shocked and offended. Such a blemish on the honour of Belgium could not go unanswered. He sent the newspaper to his superiors at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Brussels, requesting information that would prove the falsity of this disturbing allegation. He received no response, despite urgently repeating his request. Now suspicious, he spent his next home leave investigating the matter for himself in the ministry's library. He unearthed sufficient documentation to convince him that the silence from above was due to more than customary indifference. From 1975, Jules began to search through the colonial archives himself, requesting records that were not accessible to the public. The librarian in charge told him that he could not acquire them as they were stored in an unstaffed depot far from Brussels. He could gain access to them but not before his leave was over. Despite being sent away empty-handed, Jules finally struck lucky. In the ministry canteen, he usually had coffee with a porter he had befriended. When Jules told him about his fruitless quest, the latter informed him in confidence that he knew what Jules was looking for. He said that he had access to the archives and would send him a copy of the documents he had been refused access to by diplomatic post. Thus Jules was able to expose what was intended to stay hidden.

This was by no means the end of the story. Jules was intrigued by another visitor to the library, not a member of the ministry staff but a young outsider. He had requested the same documents as Jules, with equal lack of success. He knew the young man's name, Daniel Vangroenweghe, but had avoided contact with him. Both were seeking the same information but had understandably been too cautious to approach each other. Their reluctance was undoubtedly driven partly by mistrust and fear of being accused of digging up abuses from the colonial past which had, according

to prevalent official as well as public opinion, had never taken place. After visiting Jules, I also met Daniel at his home. From 1960 to 1962, he had worked as a teacher in Zaire as an alternative to compulsory military service. After returning to Europe he had studied anthropology in Leuven and Paris. His PhD research was based on fieldwork conducted in Zaire in 1973-74. While gathering information on mourning customs, he found himself taken aback by the panic and fear with which people spoke of the arrival of white rulers. These folk tales encouraged him, after being awarded his doctorate, to investigate this early colonial past in greater detail. His teaching job gave him the opportunity to do so. Daniel told me about the uproar following the publication in 1985 of his book on Leopold II's regime of terror – state officials coming to his home and school and interrogating his neighbours, seeking evidence of subversive behaviour, with the prospect of losing his job as a consequence. He spoke with great anxiety about the slander and harassment he had been subjected to. As a secondary school teacher, Daniel was much more vulnerable than Jules, who had recently retired and no longer needed to protect his anonymity. Jules had taken care to publish his books under his grandmother's name, A.M. Delathuy, and he showed me her gravestone in the garden of his house. When I asked him whether his employer had ever challenged him about his historical research, he told me that was not the case. He did not know whether the fervour with which he pursued his investigations had invoked the displeasure of senior officials at the ministry. It most probably had, but there was no apparent need to shut him up. Firstly because his work had been published in Dutch, which was not the language used at the ministry. Moreover, his publications had attracted little or no public interest. Despite the small number printed, the publishers never sold more than a handful. In desperation, Jules bought the remaining copies himself, to save them from destruction. His books were consequently no longer available from bookshops, but had to be purchased from Jules himself, one copy at a time. He was pleased with every order. Not for the money it brought in, which was much less than he had spent on producing the books. But it showed that he may have been reviled but was not disregarded or forgotten by everyone.

Jules was aware of my book on the 'coolie scandal' in Deli and the media attention it had received in the Netherlands. He said I was fortunate in having at least instigated a public debate. He himself had learned from his professional experience to keep a low profile in public and avoid any confrontation with prevailing opinion. As he told Dutch journalist Syp Wynia in an interview in 1994:

> At the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, they left me alone, because I stayed so quiet and did not act like a firebrand. I did little to attract criticism. Because I used that other name, Delathuy, I never caused the minister any difficulties. And I was not in search of glory.

The old colonial lobby

The old colonial hands in Belgium were well organized. They would come together at branch meetings of their national association to exchange memories and ensure that any reporting on the overseas past was completely free of any blemish. These veterans were led by General Emile Janssens, former commander of the Force Publique, the colonial army of the Congo Free State and later of the Belgian Congo. Janssens was the proud pillar of the lobby's considerable political clout. Dissenters like Jules and Daniel were considered traitors who fouled their own nests and had to be silenced. And for many decades, that is what happened. Jules was clearly bitter about the lack of interest and appreciation for his work. The resistance he encountered did not affect his determination to continue with it. It was not always easy to keep silent. He was filled with vicarious embarrassment when Belgian politicians denounced Mobutu and many other Congolese leaders for violating human rights. Not because the accusations were unjustified, but because of the double standard. It was an indication of the taboo surrounding the abuses committed against the Congolese people by the Belgian colonizers not only right up to independence, but also in the aftermath. After my meeting with Jules, the taboo on his publications persisted for many years. The interview with Syp Wynia was never published. During the interview, Jules did not wish to speak freely and the tape recorder had to be switched off repeatedly. 'I have to be extremely careful,' he said. 'It is a form of hysteria in Belgium. My windows will be smashed, especially if I talk to a foreign newspaper.' He told Wynia about what happened after the publication of his last book on the missionary system in the Congo. The newspaper *Het Belang van Limburg* was present at the presentation of the book and wanted to publish a portrait of him in its weekend supplement, but the association of old colonials caught wind of the plans and exerted pressure on the paper's editors to cancel it.

Public opinion did not start to change until around the beginning of the current century. Newspapers and magazines showed a willingness to review the colonial past and made use of Jules Marchal's books to do so. This was also partly because he had begun to publish in French and under his own name. Responses to his work became more common and more often

favourable rather than pejorative. An article devoted to him in the regional monthly *La Revue Toudi* reported that the mining company Union Minière du Haut-Katanga was financing a chair in African Studies at the University of Louvain-la-Neuve. *Het Belang van Limburg* changed its mind and decided that it would now interview its provincial compatriot, who until than had led a hidden existence. The interview appeared on 23 February 2002, with the title 'Jules Marchal on Forced Labour in the Congo'. On 1 June 2002, *MO* Magazine* published an article that focused on Jules's trilogy on the system of forced labour in the Belgian Congo between 1910 and 1945 (see Custers 2002). Most of these articles did not fail to mention the disregard and disrespect that he had been subjected to by colonial historians until recently. Jules died in 2003, hopefully aware that the end of the dismissal of his last work – a critical review of the still prevailing opinion of the Congo as a model colony – was in sight.

The colonial sequel to the Free State

Jules Marchal's early work on the Congo Free State was actually a rehearsal of previous observations by numerous eyewitnesses from other countries. Edmund Morel and Roger Casement, and even earlier Mark Twain and George Washington Williams, were among those who had reported in detail on the regime of terror. What gave Marchal the advantage over them was that he could shed light in this theatre of horrors from the inside. As a former colonial official he had himself taken part in the administration of reports, memoranda and official correspondence which, after being recorded in the government's annals, would disappear in the archives. Jules knew from the start how to find his way in this enormous labyrinth of files. When Leopold II finally yielded to the pressure of foreign criticism and transferred the Free State he had founded in 1885 to the Belgian government in 1908, this did not mean that Jules could close the door on a past that had occupied him all that time. He continued to sift through the colonial archives until his death. His quest had inspired him to reflect deeply on his own role in the exercise of colonial power. As district commissioner, he had routinely whipped residents of his district with the *chicotte* in front of the assembled villagers for dereliction of their duties.

> These men were sentenced for trivial offences, but that was pure hypocrisy. They would be put behind bars for not reaching their cotton quotas or if their huts were not in a perfect state of cleanliness [*parfait état de*

> *propreté*]. Not a blade of grass was to be seen around the huts – complete nonsense. These prisoners had to drop their trousers and were lashed on their buttocks. *In conspictu omnium*, with everyone watching. It was extremely humiliating. When I arrived in the Congo in '48, they would be given eight lashes on the buttocks with the *chicotte*. In 1952, that had been reduced to four – but that was just as bad. After that, we had to go into the bush for twenty days, to perform the same rigmarole. That is the great lie about the Congo: under Leopold II everything was bad and during the Belgian colonization it was all perfect. (*Het Belang van Limburg* 2002)

Jules had obediently followed the instructions of his superiors, including meting out corporal punishment. And no, he had no qualms at all about doing that. Far-reaching exploitation and enslavement of the population were after all normal practice and thus nothing to be offended about. The independence of Congo in 1960 had been a turning point for Jules. He decided to stay on in the country, but in an advisory capacity and with no administrative responsibilities. He was done with wielding the *chicotte*. And apartheid was over. As he said in his interview with Syp Wynia,

> [P]eople came to my house and I went to theirs – I found that much more pleasant. That prepared me mentally for what I was later to discover, because I saw black people not only through the eyes of a colonialist but also of a human being.

But it was his research in the archives that unleashed the real shock of repentance. The confrontation with the truth he found in the archived documents taught him to look not only at the past in a different way, but also at himself. Or that reason, he felt that his publications on the colony established by Belgium were of greater significance than those of the atrocities committed by Leopold II. In *Being Colonized* (2010), anthropologist and Africanist Jan Vansina described, on the basis of oral histories, what it meant to be colonized. It is a convincing account of coerced subjugation, mirrored from the inside and from the bottom up. Vansina identifies the time before and after 1908 as a turning point that put a stop to the absence of any form of state supervision of the terror that the concessionaries – private trading companies – exercised in the process of collecting the imposed quota of wild rubber. Yet what followed shows that there was hardly any change of regime at all. The system of forced labour introduced in 1917 meant that colonial officials determined which crops and how much of them each

male villager had to grow and supply to the state. The methodology of plunder and repression by the state now became systematic rather than arbitrary. The policy of coercion was accompanied almost to the end by dehumanization, high mortality and punishment of colonial subjects who failed in their duties: '[B]y the 1950s about one in every ten men spent time in jail each year and most men had done so at one time or another' (Vansina 2010: 215). Jules reported on the Congo as a colonial possession of Belgium in almost the same words and emphasized the continuity of the brutality, coercion, white supremacy and racist denigration. He pointed out that the mercenaries who had been employed by the Free State were taken over by the Belgian government and given formal authority. They continued to commit the same abuses they had been guilty of when employed privately. Lumumba, he said, was still much too kind in his inaugural speech of independence on the day of liberation. In his spontaneous response to the paternalistic, condescending speech of the Belgian king, he should have taken the grandson of Leopold II to task for the racism and terror that his people had suffered under colonial occupation.

In 1998, Adam Hochschild published *King Leopold's Ghost*, in which he again recounted the state of terror in the domain of the Belgian king. Many of the details in the book were sourced from the work of Marchal, who Hochschild had met in 1995. Jan Vansina had impressed on him that it was essential to consult Jules rather than his academic colleagues. The popular history he wrote became a bestseller in no time, was translated into many languages, and was awarded prizes for the accessible style in which it was written. Undoubtedly encouraged by the wide readership, a film of the book is also forthcoming. Reviewers familiar with the horrors of Leopold's Congo and its royal founder were less receptive. Dan Jacobson's review in the *London Review of Books* is a good example. Entitled 'Arch-Appropriator', Jacobson's article began by recognizing that professional histories need to be translated to make the events concerned accessible to a wider public. But that is followed by a thorough hatchet job full of complaints about inaccuracy, incompleteness and unnecessary embellishment.

It should come as no surprise that Hochschild's litany was received by the right wing in Belgium with great displeasure, which boiled over into anger. Karel Arnaut has devoted an interesting essay to this response, based on the contact he had established with old colonials, who had together founded the Africa Museum in Namur. The building exhibiting the collection of artefacts they brought back from Congo also serves as a meeting place for this circle of colonial veterans living in the town or vicinity. Their numbers are sufficient to keep their association, the Cercle royal namurois des anciens d'Afrique

(CRNAA), up and running and to illustrate the gist of their patriotism and strong support for the monarchy. The political views they share, ranging from conservative to reactionary, are accompanied by a severe dislike of opponents of the monarchy and of the glorious colonial past. In the bulletin informing members of the activities of the association, its president refutes the infamous lies repeated by Hochschild after having them whispered in his ear by compatriots 'who call themselves Belgians' (including Marchal and Vangroenweghe). Arnaut rightly emphasizes the belief underlying their rhetoric: while the Belgian colonials had devoted themselves to bringing Western culture to the people of the Congo, anti-colonials had worked to introduce pseudo-democratic institutions in Africa. These proponents of colonialism considered themselves to have been the harbingers and acclaimed in their discourse the past era as the realization of In their discourse, the past era was thus acclaimed as the realization of the imperialist ideology. Arnaut quotes a passage from one argument in the CRNAA bulletin (1999): colonization is 'une des émanations de l'esprit et du génie de l'Europe.... [L]a colonisation fait partie de notre "authenticité" européenne à tous, colonaux ou non.' According to Arnaut, these veterans point to the close ties that exited between the Belgian Congo and the homeland. Breaking that valuable bond could, in their eyes, only have a dismal effect:

> The former colonials of Namur perceive themselves, their values and their activities as residual, as remnants of a lost world, in a 'federalised Belgium'. The contemporary world which they imagine and which they stand up for involves a postcolonial relationship 'metropolis/colony'. This is a bi-national zone that consists of 'Belgium' and 'Belgium's Africa' that share the parallel predicament of falling apart – 'Belgium' through regionalization, and 'Belgium's Africa' through violence and mismanagement. Both are subject to moral decay. (Arnaut 2001)

This is exactly what political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville had in mind with his statement that the aim of the colonial mission in the nineteenth century was primarily to consolidate the national unity of European state formation. That through expansion beyond their own borders, they could both obscure and exorcise the gaping differences between the upper and lower classes at home (Breman 2021: 49-69).

In an interview in the *Nieuwsbrief van de Belgische Vereniging van Afrikanisten* in 2001, Jan Vansina explains why he did not want an academic job as an Africanist in his own country but decided to pursue a university career in the United States. He also gave his opinion at length on how the

history of the Congo was written in Belgium. In doing so, he surprisingly criticizes the work of Marchal and Vangroenweghe. In his view, the latter lacked sufficient historical depth and did not devote sufficient attention to the reliability of his sources. That accusation was not aimed at Marchal. He was a historian and had been awarded his doctorate for his thesis on Leopold II's colonial adventure. But he did have reservations about Jules's crusade:

> You can ask yourself why Vangroenweghe and Marchal were so irate. Was it because of the injustices suffered by the people of the Congo or was there some other reason? I suspect that, since they were mainly concerned with Leopold II, their anti-national inquisition was primarily aimed at the French-speaking elite in Brussels. (Arnaut and Vanhee 2001: 17)

My meeting with Daniel in 1989 was too short to deny or confirm Vansina's interpretation, though I have my doubts about it. The claim is also flagrantly at odds with the praise for him expressed by Vansina in the foreword to *Leopold II & Kongo*. He describes Daniel's book in glowing terms 'because it reveals a part of our past, a part of what we all are, and because it shows us under what circumstances inhumanity thrives' (Vangroenweghe 1985a: 3). But Jules I knew longer and better. In his case, I consider this judgement both inaccurate and unjustified. Vansina suggests that Jules went no further than Leopold II in his research. In doing so, he fails to appreciate his discussion on the continuation of bondage and repression after the transfer of the colony to the Belgian state – which Vangroenweghe also did, as a matter of fact. I have no complaints at all about how Vansina portrays historian Jean Stengers. He points out that Stengers took the Belgian political elite as the starting point of his study – 'the role played by the house of representatives, the role of the senate, etc.' – and tried to analyse the events in the Congo, in 1960 and afterwards, from a positivist perception. He strongly believed that

> historians should refrain from moral judgements. A historian cannot be a judge. Stengers's response to Vangroenweghe was that it is futile to judge what happened seventy years ago, because we do not know the morals of that time. But then along comes Marchal, who differs from Vangroenweghe in showing that the abuses in the Congo Free State were also considered abominable according to conceptions of morality at the time, and that Leopold II was aware of that fact. Stengers continued to insist that such things can no longer be proven. (Arnaut and Vanhee 2001: 17)

Way out of the impasse

The revival of the public debate on the colonial past towards the end of the twentieth century was the starting point for Belgian African historiographers to develop an argument that contributed to the establishment of a new balance. They called for an end to the old contradictions that led only to rigid opposing positions with, on the one side, the self-satisfied glorification of the Belgian Congo as a model colony and a paradise of progress and, on the other side, its vilification as a hell on earth. Hein Vanhee and Geert Castryck condemn the extreme viewpoints on both sides and offer a way to break through this dispute-ridden impasse. In doing so, they note that, although the critical view has gradually become dominant in public opinion, factual evidence of the reign of terror – such as decimation of the original population by half and accounts of hands being chopped off – has yet to be found. They also call the portrayal of African people living in romanticized unity and balance with nature and in simple, small-scale tribal communities a fabrication. These reservations are correct and help avoid a fictitious image of *le bon sauvage* as the antithesis of colonial subjection. It also helps to counter the impression that colonized societies were ruled by rigid, immutable traditions.

Vanhee and Castryck call for a dynamic and holistic approach to the African societies colonized by Belgium and, not least, to the mass disruption of the country and its people after independence. I agree entirely with their recommendation to employ multiple research methods, at least as long as that endeavour preserves the validity of cultural relativism and does not place moral and ethical judgements in advance and outside the historical and scholarly order. I am less favourably inclined to their plea for greater nuance as a criterion for acceptability. They acknowledge the merits of Vangroenweghe and Marchal, but with the reservation that neither excel in applying nuance. Their justified criticism, especially of the work of Jules Marchal, is that colonial history is reduced to an allegory of terror and violence, with the colonizers as torturers and the Congolese people as helpless victims. Despite its unique documentation, the work of Marchal was long ignored by professional historians. Nevertheless, this kind of historiography has had an enormous impact on the public debate, especially through the publication of Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost* (1998) which, as mentioned above, took much of its informative contents from Jules Marchal (Vanhee and Castryck 2002: 313).

The balance they offer gives the impression that they are seeking a middle way. But the truth is not always automatically found by adopting an 'on the one hand and on the other hand' approach. The authors are right in

arguing that colonial subservience does not always signify an absence of agency, but sometimes it does. Extreme repression can debilitate resistance and deny the space required for resistance to be overtly expressed. In my opinion, this was systematically the case, in the era of the Congo Free State and also in the Belgian Congo. The work of both Daniel and Jules provides abundant evidence for this conclusion. I wholeheartedly agree with Vanhee and Castryck that African agency and the continuity of African political cultures and economic systems must have a central place in the study of Africa's past. But the resources they employ for this multidimensional study – which, besides classical sources, include oral histories, sources in African languages, material and photographic sources – are insufficient if that does not occur in consultation with former Congolese subjects. No matter how excellently equipped the Belgian side is to better examine its colonial past and its continued impact in the postcolonial present, this laudable intention is doomed to failure if it is limited to a one-sided effort. Without the inclusion in this agenda of fellow academicians and human rights activists from the former colony itself, little will come of their nuanced and moderate approach as a goal for professional historians.

I am also afraid that not all colonial historians are prepared to cooperate on this strategy of reconciliation. Jean-Luc Vellut responded with irritation to the interview with Vansina and the direction taken by the discussion. He rejected the alleged brutalization of the Congo as an iconic metaphor for the forced incorporation of the country in modern history. Such a portrayal of the past was the consequence of the interference of semi-professional historians in Belgium's colonial expansion. This was a reference to Jules Marchal, a disqualification that Vellut exacerbated by describing Jules's work contemptuously as *Greuelgeschichte*, a horror story. Vellut admitted that Vansina had a point, in condemning the silence surrounding the absence of any recorded history immediately after the colony was incorporated in the Belgian state system. However, in his view, this accusation should not be aimed at fellow historians, but at state archivists who denied them access to these files:

> It is significant that J. Marchal, though [a] member in disgrace of the Foreign Affairs department, nevertheless gained years-long access to sources which had been kept off limits to less well introduced scholars. It is also fascinating to read that Vansina advised the talented interpreter of Marchal's rather pedestrian production, Adam Hochschild, to concentrate on Marchal's work and to keep clear of historians such as Stengers and Vellut. (Vellut 2002)

In his aggrieved response, Vellut bemoans Vansina's criticism of the History Section of the Africa Museum in Tervuren. He predicts that this institution, founded as a Palace of the Colonies by Leopold II for the 1897 Brussels International Exposition, would become a platform for clashing opinions on Belgium's colonial past. He identifies a number of antagonists in the coming confrontation and leaves no doubt as to which camp he himself belongs: against the anti-colonialists, which is a nest of radicals, and for the nuance, which does justice to the complexity of the issue 'in the tradition of enlightened scholarship'. I feel that this is a different kind of nuance than that envisaged by Vanhee and Castryck.

A disputed memory

Vellut's prediction indeed came true in the years that followed, with Vellut himself initially as a central protagonist. I limit myself here to a short summary on the basis of press releases relating to Tervuren as a hotbed of unrest. The museum was in urgent need of renewal, and in more respects than the antiquated collection alone. An exhibition in 2005 was intended to mark a renewed perspective on the colonial past. Vellut proved willing to curate the exhibition, which was entitled 'The Memory of the Congo: The Colonial Era', and also wrote the introduction in its catalogue. In *De Standaard*, museum director Guido Gryseels informed visitors what they could expect to see. The exhibition did not aim to accuse or condemn, but to understand. He clarified that perspective by referring to the spirit of the time. 'Today, the concept of colonialism is of course completely unacceptable in moral terms. But in that time, every country [in Europe] considered it necessary to support its own economic development' (Gryseels 2005). Those who went to the Congo were by definition rough folk and violence had a different significance then than today. The director of course also mentioned the royal founder of the museum, saying that a lot of nonsense had been written and said about him and his 'so-called crimes'. He referred to books by 'amateur historians' on the early period of the Congo Free State. 'You can condemn the actions of Leopold II,' he wrote, 'but you cannot deny that this man had a certain vision in a certain spirit typical of the times, and that he made a great contribution to the economic development of the Congo' (Gryseels 2005). It was the express intention to look at the past from an African perspective, but Gryseels had to admit that the Congolese contribution to the exhibition was minimal, citing practical reasons as an excuse. Asked for his opinion by *De Morgen*, Daniel Vangroenweghe

prudently dosed his criticism (Vangroenweghe 2005). In his soft-pedalled view it was indeed an exaggeration to describe the actions of the rubber regime as genocide. But they did amount to large-scale violations of human rights and severe disruption of the colonized community through terror, hunger and disease. The *chicotte*, the instrument of torture wielded by the white masters to discipline their black subjects for many decades, was unjustly described as a mere whip. Vangroenweghe also notes the striking absence of Leopold II in the presentation. It would have been impossible to maintain his customary image as a benevolent ruler, but he also makes no appearance in his malign guise. Daniel was more robust on Leopold's total absence in his own museum. The link between the monarch and the barbaric rubber exploitation is not made clear. There is no reference at all to his crown lands, considered as his own personal property. Nor to the fact that he was an absolute monarch with neither a parliament or ministers. I know, he continued, of few colonies where the conquering power immediately set about exploiting the population so extremely. When asked whether the king was aware of the cruelties committed, his response was in no uncertain terms: 'Anyone who denies it is not to be trusted and a negationist. No monarch has ever devoted such hands-on attention to his colony as Leopold II. There is ample documentary evidence to support this claim' (Vangroenweghe 2005). Vangroenweghe is even more accommodating about the late-colonial period. He admitted that the Congo evolved into a model colony, especially in terms of healthcare and literacy. No doubt, Jules Marchal would not have agreed with his assessment. The final work that Jules was engaged in towards the end of his life was devoted to this period of colonial rule. Unfortunately, he was unable to complete it.

The Tervuren exhibition attracted much attention also in the Netherlands. An article in *De Academische Boekengids* (November 2006) discusses the Dutch counterpart of Leopold II. It was after all merchant-king Willem I who inspired Leopold to embark on his colonial adventures. The Dutch king had also made Java his personal fief and introduced the infamous cultivation system that had proved so profitable for him (Breman 2010). In his discussion of the exhibition, Ieme van der Poel lamented the disappearance of its original character. Its portrayal of the colonial past must not be lost. Tervuren was a time capsule or, in Vellut's words, 'a museum of a colonial museum'. For Van der Poel, the same applied to the Teylers Museum in Haarlem.

> No right-thinking person would ever come up with the disastrous idea of giving these museums a facelift because, in terms of design and content, they no longer conform to contemporary notions of what a museum

> should be. The Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam has even been restored at great expense to its original state from a century ago. The situation of Tervuren is not essentially different, except that in its current form the museum offers no explanation at all of the exhibition. But it is completely unnecessary to fill that gap by 'modernising', and certainly not 'updating', the unique interior of this historical monument. (Van der Poel 2006)

As was to be expected, Adam Hochschild took advantage of the opportunity to have his biting say about contemporary Belgian historiography, and Stengers and Vellut, in particular. He was severely critical of Tervuren in an extensive article in *The New York Review of Books* (October 2005). The exhibition clearly showed, he argued, that neither the museum nor Belgium as a whole had learned from the horrific colonial past. In his view, in a persistent spirit of denial, the holocaust in the Congo Free State had been promptly and fully swept under the royal carpet.

Tervuren, meeting place and battleground

Five years later, new festivities were planned to celebrate fifty years of Congo's independence. On *Apache*, a Belgian news site for research journalism, sociologist Ludo de Witte wrote an opinion piece on the fifteenth Africa Film Festival in April 2010. While understanding that it wais not the right moment to drag up painful memories, De Witte did complain about the absence of reflection. He cited the *Canvas* Congo website as an example:

> According to *Canvas*, there was 'strictly speaking no racist colour bar as in British South Africa. To the outside world, the Belgian Congo was a model state.' That the colour bar – a euphemism for apartheid – was worse in the colonial Congo than in South Africa had to be withheld from the readers. The inhabitants of the colony were divided along racial lines determining their rights and obligations, with consequences that left deep scars in their daily lives. In the words of Jef van Bilsen, 'In Congo, racism, segregation and the colour bar were deeply rooted in the mentality of many white people and in the laws and regulations.' (De Witte 2010)

De Witte continues his criticism of the *Canvas* site by noting that, in its review of the exhibition held in 2005 on the first five years of independence, not a word was said about the role of Belgium and the West in destroying the young democracy and helping Mobutu take power. He is equally critical

of the Africa Museum in Tervuren. After the exhibition of 2005, he has no great expectations for 'Indépendance! Congolese Accounts of Fifty Years of Independence'. He notes that the exhibition was to run until eight days before the fiftieth anniversary of the murder of Patrice Lumumba. Was this a deliberate choice to avoid attention to Belgium's close and direct involvement in this crime and to deprive human rights activists of the opportunity to bring it to the public's attention?

Lastly there was the reopening of the Royal Museum for Central Africa in 2018, after it had been closed for five years to undergo radical renovation. After many weeks of uncertainty, King Philippe announced that he would not be attending the reopening ceremony at the end of December. Some sources alleged that his decision was related to the fact that the restyled museum was attempting to look at the past through a different lens. The statue of Leopold, for example, was reportedly now accompanied by a critical text. These rumours of royal displeasure were of course denied. Yet the anger of the spokesman of colonial veterans, who complained that despite the large volume of materials they had supplied, their ideas regarding the renovation had fallen on deaf ears, gives food for thought. As do the testimonies that unanimously praise the colonial era as a magnificent time.

> We were carefully and maliciously kept at arm's length. Why? In 2005, there was 'The Memory of the Congo', an updated, well-balanced exhibition, led objectively by UCL [Université Catholique de Louvain] historian Jean-Luc Vellut, a wonderful man, between whom and the museum there is little love lost. There are a few dark forces at play in the museum that place ideology above a scientific approach. (Vileyn 2018)

Guido Bosteels is the president of this association. He is eighty-eight years old and still under contract to the museum. The association's members work as volunteer guides at the museum. At the end of December 2019, I found a report from the same source on an incident at the museum, which led to a guide being suspended. While showing a group of history students from the University of Antwerp around, his explanation was accompanied by racist comments. The museum's head of publicity acknowledged the validity of the complaint and dismissed the incident as an 'error of judgement', ((ADD 2019),

Thus far my account on Tervuren as a place where the public is informed about Belgium's relations with the Congo in the past and in the present. It gives little grounds for optimism. I conclude that the differences of opinion are too great to come to an overall assessment somewhere in the middle. I would like to emphasize that, though this divergence is projected on the

events in the Congo, it cannot be seen separately from the domestic politics and social landscape in Belgium itself. Moreover, with the passing of time, the polarization seems to have become more rather than less marked. That leads me to the following conclusions. First, it is incorrect to leave the writing of colonial history to professional academics, and certainly when they tend to dismiss other practitioners of their craft as pseudo-, semi- or amateur historians. My second observation is that, when examining the past, moral and ethical facets cannot be ignored. Moralism gave meaning to and was the essence of imperialism. The subjugation of far-off, alien peoples was justified as bringing civilization, later known as development, where it did not yet exist. '*La mission civilisatrice*' or 'the white man's burden' often – and not only in the Congo – degenerated into barbarism. Not to describe and analyse this aspect when studying colonial history is, or at least comes close to, falsification of history. Coming to terms with it, on the other hand, undeniably raises the thorny problem of discussing the risk that such historiography might be used as a handmaiden to boosting the national interest. My conclusion is that any attempt to better understand this chapter in Belgium's history and bring it closer to past reality indeed demands a broadening of the context. Much of what is under discussion in Belgium is equally applicable to the colonial enterprise of the Netherlands.

It was not only the profiles of kings of the two countries that displayed striking similarities. Leopold II went in search of colonial possessions in many regions of the world. As Stengers relates, he sought contact with The Hague as early as 1861 to enquire whether he could take over control of what was then Borneo (Kalimantan), in return for payment (Stengers 1989). This is precisely the same imperialist manner of thinking behind Trump's recent offer to buy Greenland from Denmark. The predatory exploitation that took place in the Free State was no exception to the rule. The scandals in the Congo were of the same order as the way in which the Netherlands and others exploited their overseas possessions. Last, the variant of the *Historikerstreit* conducted in Belgium takes place in the same tone in the Netherlands. Expanding on these similarities falls beyond the scope of this essay.

Behind the façade of a model colony

The aversion to and resistance against present-day racism that erupted around the world at large also gave a powerful incentive to calls to review the way we see our colonial past. Now and again, the pioneers of this critical perspective come to the fore to talk about the obstacles they encountered

in their endeavours to bring to light the long and carefully concealed dark side of the colonial enterprise. In an interview with *De Standaard* entitled 'A Truth Commission? The Truth Is Already Known' (Vangroenweghe 2020), Daniel Vangroenweghe makes it clear that he has no intention of taking back a single word of the account which primarily invoked abuse against him three and half decades ago. The pressure to which he was exposed from official quarters affected him deeply and in his retrospective he points without reticence to the royal court as its initiator. Despite the lack of appreciation he experienced from colonial historians, he was spared further affronts thanks to the protection afforded to him by Stengers and Vellut when he came under vile scrutiny. The evidence he presented for the abuses and crimes committed was irrefutable, based on sources that he had inadvertently gained access to. Sensitive documents were marked 'ne pas communiquer aux chercheurs' ('not to be made available to researchers'). The sustained refusal to give him access to the archives broke down when the sitting archivist retired and was replaced by untrained students. The registers that Daniel was now able to consult showed clearly that that the collection had been purged of incriminating documents, a clean-up operation that had continued into the 1950s. To counteract calls for statues of 'heroes' from the imperialist past to be removed, ultra-nationalist politicians proposed establishing monuments to commemorate compatriots killed in the line of duty in the colony. A very bad idea, in Vangroenweghe's eyes.

> Statues for colonials? That's just adding fuel to the fire. If you want to make the Congolese very angry, that's an excellent way to do it. The colonial regime was not as cruel as that under Leopold II, but it was certainly guilty of exploitation, and violent and humiliating practices. That the healthcare system was so good is overstated. Belgian colonialism too was primarily aimed at earning as much money as possible from the Congo's natural resources. No, if we were to erect new statues, then they should be for Congolese women; they have suffered greatly throughout the country's history. I recently received a document relating how colonials took pleasure in letting the wife of a village chief be raped by a villager in public. That is the perversion of power, pure terror. (Vangroenweghe 2020)

Back to Jules Marchal

Jules Marchal's last book was published in English posthumously (2008). It is a translation of the third part of Jules's quartet on forced labour and starts

with an introduction by Hochschild, in which he expresses his appreciation and gratitude for Marchal. It is not from piety that I draw attention to this work, but to emphasize its significance to take stock of the late-colonial political economy. It addresses the period from 1910 to 1945, the years in which, according to official opinion, Belgium transformed the Congo into a model colony. Jules's extensive documentation shows that this portrayal of the facts in inaccurate. The harvesting of wild rubber was an obsolete form of primitive accumulation, which was replaced by the regulated cultivation of crops and the extraction of mineral resources (gold, copper, tin, oil and uranium) in a large-scale agricultural-cum-mining economy. The raw natural resources were transported from the colony to the metropolis to be fabricated into industrial commodities. In the exemplary case described in the book, this occurred by allocating some 5.5 million hectares (twice the size of Belgium) to an expatriate captain of capitalist industry to be cultivated by palm oil plantations. The huge labour force required was not recruited on a voluntary basis, but requisitioned and set to work under coercion. In his introduction, Hochschild presents the writer and his findings in the following words:

> Marchal's 40 years in government service taught him to uncover documents that writers of laudatory biographies and cheerful corporate histories have long ignored. This particular book is an implicit response to such volumes about Lord Leverhulme and the corporate empire he and his brothers founded – books like the biography of Leverhulme by W.P. Jolly, whose upbeat chapter on the Congo is largely based on Leverhulme's diaries of the two trips he made there. Like so many white men engaged in the Congo, Leverhulme considered himself and his work there wise and enlightened. It is quite a different story that Marchal tells in these pages. (2005: xxi)

Shipped in bulk to be industrially processed in England, the palm oil was used to make soap in the factory owned by William Lever – later Lord Leverhulme – and his brother James. The location of the factory on the coast of North Wales was named Port Sunlight, after the soap it produced. In his metropolitan guise, William was a caring employer who built attractive and splendidly designed houses for his workers. The model village also had a hospital, a swimming pool, a theatre and, later, a museum. William housed his art collection in the Lady Lever Gallery, named after the wife of his older brother (Vangroenweghe 2020). William is also known as a teetotaller, Calvinist and freemason. The portrait of this philanthropist, a

man who tried to improve the lot of his workers and was concerned about the weaker members of society at home, would be incomplete without recording that he was an avid proponent of colonialism in Africa and Asia. His labour policy in these far-off lands was founded on exploitation and oppression. It is this regime that Jules described at length. This detailed study leads me to draw two conclusions. Firstly, much Western capital accumulated at a disproportionate rate of profit as a result of locking up the colonial workforce in bondage. After the death of the Lever brothers, who had expanded their activities to include the manufacture of various food products, their companies merged at the end of 1929 with the Dutch Margarine Union. Under its new name Unilever, this multinational company has grown over the decades into a gigantic corporation operating worldwide. This mega-empire prides itself on its eminent care for labour, health and the environment. The early history of Lever Brothers subsidiary Huileries du Congo Belge (HCB) tells a different story, as Jules has shown. His book also documents the conspiracy in the late-colonial era between large-scale capitalist corporations and the colonial state. The ideology of neoliberalism under which the global working population has suffered for the past half a century was preceded a hundred years ago in that part of the world that had over time come under European rule. History clearly shows the intimate relationship between capitalism, colonialism and racism. The political, economic, social, cultural and ecological impact of this regime has remained without repair and bodes dire prospects for the future of humanity.

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Part IV

Political Advocacy of the Multinational State

Figure 9.1. The need for continued submission. Planter with Deli cigar, by Eberhard Freiherr von Wechmar. Source: E.F. von Wechmar, *Delianer. Collectie lithografieën* (Delians: A collection of lithographs), Medan, 1927.

9 The Colour Bar as the Crux of Colonial Rule

> And there came strangers from the West, who made themselves lord and master of the land. They wished to reap the benefits of the fertility of the soil, and ordered the inhabitants to devote part of their labour and their time to fulfilling other tasks – there used to be talk namely of rice, which the Javanese people needed to stay alive – other tasks, that would produce greater profits on markets in Europe.
> – Multatuli, *On Free Labour in the Dutch East Indies, and the Current Colonial Agitation* (1862: 38-39)

Racism in the service of economic profit

I followed up my book on Deli's plantation workforce in the late-colonial era with a study on the forced cultivation of coffee imposed by the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (Dutch East India Company, VOC) on the peasantry in the Priangan region of Java from the early eighteenth century onwards. The same regime expanded into the well-known cultivation system which the early colonial state operated from 1830 to 1870. The use of labour coercion was justified with the argument that the peasants were found unwilling to work and had to be ordered under threat of punishment to produce commercial crops – mainly coffee, sugar cane and indigo – traded on an expanding global market. The people of the highlands of West Java were forced to lay out coffee gardens, plant the crop and bring the harvested and dried beans to faraway warehouses built by order of the government. Reading through the archives enabled me to record how the Javanese cultivators were envisaged as human beings unwilling to work beyond satisfaction of their basic needs. In colonial historiography, these supposedly slothful people were portrayed as lacking the drive to engage in waged work and thus seek relief from their backwardness caused by their unwillingness to produce more than the food they needed for survival.

In a revisionist reappraisal of this notorious cultivation system, colonial historians such as Fasseur (1975, 1980), Van Niel (1992), Elson (1994) and De Jong (1998) came to a favourable balance of what the harsh regime had managed to attain. Besides the high profits which were drained off, the forced levy of crops from the peasantry had in their view helped alleviate chronic poverty and low productivity. Endorsing the colonial wisdom of

a missing propensity to work properly, Elson acknowledged that while the requisitioned labour was paid at a very low rate, it was income which would not otherwise have been generated. The logic was clear: *servitude had encouraged the Javanese to internalize the drive to work and, accordingly, to move ahead on the road to progress.* My monograph on the origin of the Priangan system and its continuation in the cultivation system stands in sharp contrast to this laudatory assessment (Breman 2015).

The 'othering of the native' emerged early in the practice of crude racism, and was given a more polished veneer in the late-colonial era with Julius Boeke's theory of economic dualism. According to Boeke, the divide between Western and Oriental economics was unbridgeable. The opening sentence of his PhD thesis, submitted to the University of Amsterdam in 1910, referred to the laziness attributed to the colonial tillers of the soil: 'The saying that a Javanese peasant never walks when he can stand still, never sits when he can lie down, is proverbial' (Boeke 1910: 1).

Covering up the essence of what colonialism was founded upon – naked exploitation – cannot be disregarded in passing judgement on what Dutch rule aimed to accomplish. Its prime objective from the very beginning was to maximize profit making. As governor-general, Jean Chrétien Baud had aptly phrased it when pushed to slightly increase the excessively low price the peasants received for growing coffee: '[T]o pay more for what you can get for less is not a sound economic proposition' (Breman 2015: 233). The main maxim of colonial policy when Baud stepped down as minister of colonies in 1848 testified to the ideology of racialized apartheid which he had institutionalized when he took charge of the colonial machinery in the early nineteenth century. In Chapter 2 I have already pointed out his pivotal role in the fabrication of colonial statecraft which included the fixation of a rigid colour bar. Baud's resignation as minister of colonies did not stop him from continued interference in overseas affairs. He was appointed chair of the parliamentary committee instigated to draft legislation for the abolition of slavery, which became law in 1863 and regulated the transition to free labour also in the West Indies, mainly in Suriname. The slave-owners received compensation for the loss of their property, paid from profits from the cultivation system on Java. The freed slaves received nothing and were obliged to continue working for their masters for another number of years.

At the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, colonialism was transformed from a project, aimed at making profit and draining off the gross value added to the homeland, to one which would allow the subjected people to share in the generated wealth. The pledge to foster their material and immaterial advancement was postulated as a civilizing mission that

would push and coach the Indonesian masses on the road to enlightenment and modernity. As will be highlighted in the next chapter, the main stakeholders who were party to this policy were strongly divided on how to level up a society and economy which, according to them, remained stuck in backwardness. They failed to realize their stated objective, be it the alleviation of poverty or the conversion of the population to Christianity. Despite the connotations of improvement and progress which both contenders aimed at, that stamp of modernity proved to be disputable. As far as enlightenment is concerned, given the ample evidence of authoritarian rule backed up by a ban on anything that could be understood as disturbance of public peace and order, it would be preposterous to suggest that the late-colonial state endeavoured to coach the Indonesian people in the route to democracy and self-rule.

The aspect of the alleged Ethical Policy that encountered the least resistance was modernization of the infrastructure. Lowly waged and drummed up as corvée labour, the peasant mass carried out a wide range of public works for the construction of roads and bridges, rail and tram lines, ports, irrigation canals and dams, warehouses, offices and other utility buildings. This boom in building mainly served capitalist interests but, at least for the duration of the construction and maintenance activities, it provided employment at a time when there was a dire shortage of waged work in or outside the agrarian economy. Of great significance was the introduction of new services for agricultural extension, popular credit schemes and medical care that were independent of the civil service and widened the scope of the machinery of governance. Land-owning cultivators benefited from the expansion of irrigation systems. Greater attention was devoted to education, which beyond the primary level allowed for modest access to a variety of new occupations in private business or government. The need for a broader package of modern services and provisions, together with the promise that government would play an increasingly active role in securing the welfare of its colonial subjects, led to the expansion of public agencies and departments staffed in the middle and lower executive ranks by Indonesian officials. A job as a clerk, messenger, driver or guard also offered the prospect of a better life and upward mobility. Trade, industry, transport or services helped to engage the Indonesian workforce more widely than had previously been the case.

This sector-based diversification led to the growth of urban centres and aroused expectations that reflected changing perspectives among the population. Although the desire for more and better applied to the colonial population at large, the higher classed segment among the non-white

communities, identified as Euro-Asians or Indo-Europeans, were at the forefront in giving voice to these aspirations. Baud's sharp racial dividing line, which excluded people of mixed race from government employment, was no longer sustainable under the changed structure of colonial society. The caste of white Europeans, however, retained its dominant status and its monopoly of power and authority, and resisted progressive racial blending by bringing in more women of their own ethnicity from the homeland. That was only partially successful: in 1940; about one-fifth of the full-blooded European males still married Indo-European, Indo-Chinese or otherwise 'indigenous' women.

Colonial society as a multi-ethnic hierarchy

The autochthonous mass of the population at the very broad lower end of the multi-coloured spectrum was now increasingly classified as Indonesian. The overwhelming majority, who lived in the countryside and worked in village-based agriculture, were expected to fit without complaint into the lowest strata of the colonial system. Between the extreme poles of the white versus non-white spectrum, a layer had crystallized which, during the process of socio-economic transition, had increased considerably in number and possessed a multi-ethnic identity. It was a minority pallet that consisted not only of Euro-Asians, but also Chinese and 'Foreign Orientals' (of Arab, Lebanese or Indian origin). Knowledge of the ruling Dutch language and culture ran roughly parallel to the sliding scale from dark to lighter skin colour. Level of education in the ruling language and culture determined social position, from lower to higher. The associated lifestyle reflected a syncretic habitus, with features derived from both Dutch and Indonesian society and culture. One characteristic of this hybrid contingent was its function as a conduit between the small top and the broad base of colonial society. Its members acted as interpreters in both directions, literally translating and decoding what was misunderstood in the intentionally remote interaction between those at the top and the bottom. This intermediate and ethnically composite layer – working in trade, industry and service provision – fulfilled brokerage functions required to keep the wheels of the colonial machinery turning. The colonial civilizing offensive driven by the Ethical Policy was both a response and a stimulant to these aroused expectations (Bloembergen and Raben 2009). It is the blend of cultural differences in lifestyle in the growing social middle zone that seems to have anchored itself as *tempo doeloe* (good old days) in the collective memory of the colonial elite.

The emphasis on the dynamic generated by the blending of different echelons must not detract attention from the reified character of the dividing lines that had come into existence. The contact between the multi-coloured segments of the colonial hierarchy took the form of informal encounters across racial boundaries. But there was no question of formalizing this interaction in law, governance or policy. It was not possible to appeal to the less rigid code of conduct that had become acceptable in social intercourse. Sociologist Wim Wertheim described how his legal expertise was used to mark the fault lines. As a member of the Visman Commission, set up in 1940 to propose constitutional reforms, he had access to official documentation in which widespread racial discrimination had been recorded. This account brought to light frustrations about the discrepancy between formal legislation and informal practice (Wertheim 1978, 1991). 'Cornerstone and Stumbling Block: Racial Classification and the Late Colonial State in Indonesia' was the title of Cees Fasseur's essay on race as the organizing principle of the colonial order (1994). In his discussion of legalized dualism, he referred to the proceedings of the People's Council, set up in the colony in 1916, stating that domination and the racial criterion were indeed inseparable and should be kept intact. This preamble had its origins in the assumed supremacy of the white race and its inherent social Darwinist ideology. In stark contrast to the advance of social equality in Europe, the government tightened up its policy of discrimination in the late-colonial era. Customs and traditions were now labelled as 'indigenous rights' and studied as *adat* in academic teaching and research. The rejection of proposals by the Visman Commission to end inequality under the law confirmed that any formal breach of the dividing lines was out of the question. The split between stringent official policy and milder social practice was sustained until the bitter end. When he continued his academic career in the Netherlands, Wertheim reflected on racism as a fundamental trait of colonial society (1949, 1978, 1990, 1991). It meant that coloured subjects – more than 65 million people – firmly remained degraded to subalternity in the multinational state that had been established. Only 250,000 white Europeans – less than 1 per cent of the total population in 1930 – were eligible for full citizenship status, whether they were permanent or temporary residents. This privileged community, however, was in relative terms still a much larger segment than held sway in British India. J.S. Furnivall (1939: 464), a British expert on the Dutch East Indies, used the term 'Aryan vintage' to describe the racial nature of this dominance in both British and Dutch domains in the late-colonial era.

Assimilation was the most radical and censured form of the ethical call to civilize the Indonesian population. The *Encyclopædie van Nederlandsch-Indië*

described this ambition as 'the desire to make colonial conditions and regulations as far as possible equal to those in the metropole, or at least to consider and treat them as equal' (Stibbe 1917: 67). A much more moderate version of this missionary ideal was the notion of association which happened to be the only one practiced. This entailed intensifying the ties between colony and mother country in order to make the benefits of the homeland's civilization (in the broadest sense) available to the colonial population, while fully respecting the characteristics of their own culture (Stibbe 1917: 67). The Ethical Policy proved to be a brief hiccup of benevolent intentions that brought about no fundamental change in the pursued policy. The meagre budget made available for it was insufficient to pay off the acknowledged 'debt of honour'. But the most significant obstacle was the obstinate unwillingness of the ruling white caste to put a stop to the hardship of the Indonesian people. Intended as a moral appeal, the abolition of discrimination in daily practice was dismissed as a premature pledge of the end of the Netherlands' custody of the colony. The ambition of bringing segregated segments together through the unconditional acceptance of racial blending was frustrated by persistent preservation of the colour bar.

The resistance among the white bourgeoisie to a levelling up policy of the Indonesian population extended deep into the stifling colonial machinery. It was often expressed through publicly voiced doubts or irritations, but also in more covert obstruction of the intention to civilize a race that, in the eyes of these opponents, was incapable of achieving that ideal under their own steam. In a collection of essays, Elspeth Locher-Scholten described the Ethical Policy as 'aimed not only at increasing economic resilience, but also constitutional rights, the association of different population groups, promoting education, just governance and expediting empowerment of the Indonesian population as soon as possible' (1981: 191). Locher-Scholten further clarified this ambitious intention as the development of land and people towards self-government, under Dutch supervision and according to the Western model (1981: 201). Her study documents the failing implementation of this policy in most respects. Assimilation, which aimed to bring the social structure of the colony in line with that of the homeland, was consistently denied. The concept was based on the assumption of an emancipatory movement similar to the one which had allowed the working classes in the Netherlands to demand and acquire a modicum of social equality and political rights to citizenship. Following that route was doomed to founder on the racist policies in the Indies. Yet, the idea of association that Locher-Scholten identified as one of the pillars of the Ethical Policy also had little or no chance of developing in the colonial milieu. Civilizational rapprochement

was avoided rather than sought out. White supremacy was and remained a credo that did not tolerate being eroded by measures that would negatively impact on the prevailing statutory segregation.

The inferiority assigned to the Indonesian population was confirmed by colonial psychology (Pols 2007). In his medical practice, Jacob Kohlbrugge found proof of the infantile, docile and work-shy soul of the Javanese, defects on which he reported extensively (1907). It was a professional assessment founded on the ideas of eugenics. This dogma of genetic superiority, which in the early twentieth century enjoyed considerable support in Europe, warned the master race that mixed blood was a source of genetic contamination and a threat to civilization. Resistance to and even total denial of the acclaimed levelling up of the inferior race was of course closely related to the looming threat posed by the emergence of the nationalist movement. Maintenance of the colonial order met with resistance from a vanguard of the Indonesian population. This steadily growing counter movement expressed criticism of the patronizing authority of the colonial state which ignored any claim to self-rule from the Indonesian people on the basis of their own identity.

Indonesians who were already a little better off and living in urban locales started to form their own cultural and religious associations to express and share their collective objectives. These civil initiatives were beyond the reach of the government and, as long as they did not seek to challenge the boundaries of colonial authority, could be established without risk of embargo. They nestled in the limited space that allowed for development of their distinct common awareness and without confronting the colonial state. Bob van Niel has extensively reported on the emergence and formation of this modern Indonesian vanguard. Such initiatives, somewhat higher up in the Indonesian social scale and willing to seek accommodation within the existing pecking order, prevented these pioneers from publicly and forcefully confronting the preservation of foreign domination (Van Niel 1984: 242).

Resistance, repression and adaptation

The awakened spirit of resistance to colonial domination and exploitation in ther early twentieth century reflected the changed composition of the working population. The 1870 Agrarian Law, which prohibited the village-based economy from expanding cultivation to land still lying waste or made use of only irregularly, was introduced to promote large-scale capitalist agriculture. Claiming right of expatriate usage over tracts held until then in reserve for Indonesian cultivators set in motion a process of

proletarianization in the peasant economy which has received conspicuously little attention in colonial historiography (Djalins 2012). Together with population expansion, restricting cultivation to the fields already under tillage and denying inhabitants access to land as yet unclaimed but used on and off for a variety of purposes, had led to a steady expansion of the land-poor and landless classes. Unable to find sufficient waged work in their own habitat, this army of dispossessed peasants in the already thoroughly monetized rural economy sought permanent or casual employment as coolies on plantations or in public works. The improved infrastructure also facilitated labour migration to towns and cities. Yet the process of urbanization was slow; in 1930, towns with more than 5,000 inhabitants still accounted for only 8 per cent of the total population. Even that figure is disputable, as around four out of every ten who came to the city to work were not permanent migrants. This footloose proletariat shuttled between town and country for the duration of their working lives, after which they returned for good to their places of origin. Circular migration was a consequence of the informal labour system that signified a lack of sustained employment for the majority of the economically active population. An educated and skilled vanguard was eligible for a regular job in the formal sector of the economy, which offered them some protection through still extremely sparse labour legislation.

Qualifying for more skilled and somewhat better paid work was mediated by trade unions whose members were recruited from migrants who managed to settle down in the towns and cities. They were mobilized to promote their collective interests and resorted to industrial action to back up their call for improved terms of employment (Ingleson 1986). It should come as no surprise that trade unions were and remained mono-racial organizations. The higher positions in the labour hierarchy were taken by whites and they took collective action through a separate circuit of trade unionism. The colour bar was rarely breached in a display of solidarity. A notable exception was the leader of the assistant managers' union in the plantation belt on the East Coast of Sumatra who sharply rebuked a European blackleg during an Indonesian rail strike. His call for a single trade union for white and brown employees led to his immediate dismissal and forced him to board a ship for the Netherlands a few days later (see Chapter 5). On Java, too, such cross-border initiatives were doomed to failure (Ingleson 1981).

The government made no secret of its singular commitment to the promotion of capitalist interests and its willingness to subordinate those of labour. This biased policy allowed big business to develop unhindered by government interference in the free interplay of market forces, even

when this led to blatant exploitation and repression, The assumption was that this high-handed policy would also be of benefit to the economy of the homeland. The alignment of the interests of state and capital inevitably resulted in the emerging Indonesian labour movement adopting an explicit anti-colonial stance. The economic growth in the aftermath of World War I encouraged militancy in the movement. Fearing its escalating assertiveness, the government's initial accommodating response was replaced by a more authoritarian approach, drastically reducing the scope for industrial action. The disciplining of the trade unions was consolidated by a ban on inciting strikes. The authorities resorted to exorbitant powers to preserve law and order. An ordinance outlawing incitement to actively resist repression introduced in 1925 stipulated that 'any person expressing feelings of animosity, hatred or contempt towards the government of the Netherlands or of the Dutch East Indies will be punished'. The Political Intelligence Service (PID) established in 1916 built up an extensive network of informers, petty collaborators who reported on incidents of disloyal conduct that they saw or heard in the workplace, in *kampungs*, or at meetings and demonstrations. The institutional framework gave this surveillance regime the character of a police state (Poeze 1994; Bloembergen 2009). The postcolonial Indonesian political and bureaucratic apparatus would, after a brief democratic prelude, make good use of this colonial legacy.

The repression of labour activism intensified after a failed communist uprising in 1926-27. Suppressing the rebellion resulted in the arrest of 13,000 suspects, 4,500 of whom were sent to prison. A hard core of 1,200 ringleaders were given long sentences in Boven-Digoel concentration camp in New Guinea. Four of the main suspects were hanged. The shock generated by this insurrection led to closer scrutiny of individuals, associations and organizations suspected of harbouring subversive intentions. Trade unions were subject to strict controls. Instead of seeking confrontation, their leaders did what they could within the limited room to manoeuvre allowed to them. Basic rights, such as freedom of assembly, association and expression, were suspended to prevent union members from being mobilized for anything other than economic demands and grievances. Negotiations with employers had to remain within narrowly defined boundaries of propriety.

A public prosecutor was attached to the Labour Office charged with detecting and defusing labour agitation. His efforts to do so led him to suggest that the dactyloscopic bureau set up in 1917 in the Department of Justice would put on record the fingerprints and other biodata of the workforce employed by large-scale capitalist enterprises. Until then this novel form of personal identification had been restricted to the prosecution

of criminal offenses. It was now used to spot and weed out troublemakers among the employees who had found regular jobs in big business (Vreede 1926: 87). The same method was also used to track down coolies who ran away from plantations before their contracts had expired. Capitalist management acting in collusion with colonial officialdom tolerated no opposition to its denial of elementary labour rights.

Membership of a union could also be cause for dismissal, if an employer took this evidence of raised consciousness as the sign of an agitator (Ingleson 1986; Ingleson 2014). Censorship ensured that union publications were unable to inform their members freely on matters pertaining to defence of their interests. Behind the dictated code of restrictions on social interaction lay a militant opposition that tried to escape from official surveillance. The Ethical Policy was patronizing in nature, going no further than cultivating compliance and subservience. Critics of the policy both in the homeland and the colony argued, not without justification, that introducing Western education and knowledge of Dutch language and culture only encouraged political unrest. One indication of this unintended consequence was that a sizable segment of the nationalist movement came from the somewhat better-off minority within the workforce. Not from the propertyless and illiterate army of casual labourers in the informal economy who came on and off to the towns and cities in search of waged work, and even less so from the mass of the rural population. This meant that the dissemination of aspirations to freedom was obstructed by a lack of information, education and other attributes, including involvement in organized action. The majority of those ethnic minorities who lived and worked in the shadow of the white colonial elite had a similar lack of affinity with the ideals of the independence movement. Fear of being inundated by a surging current of educated Indonesians ensured that this racially mixed class played by the colonial rules (Wertheim 1978: 107).

Where the burgeoning nationalist movement resisted oppression and sought confrontation through non-cooperation, the broad and widely varying intermediate communities of Indo-Europeans, Chinese and 'foreign Orientals' as well as the higher-up segments of the Indonesian population acquiesced in the established colonial order. They were eager to cultivate as far as possible their ties with the white elite. A significant factor in this complex configuration of collaboration was that racial identity and social class to a large extent ran parallel. This confluence applied to both life and work, producing a striking variety of lifestyles and confirmed segregation as the leading principle of the colonial framework. Despite themselves being the victim of discrimination by the full-blooded expatriate community,

many Indo-Europeans did not in their turn hesitate in treating the lower classes of Indonesian society as racial inferiors.

Care for the poor and its coloured bias

The perceived habitus of the Indonesian population to work no harder than was necessary to fulfil their basic needs was inevitably accompanied by the absence of accumulative behaviour. According to prevailing opinion, the poverty in which the peasant population chose to live went hand in hand with a willingness to share what little they produced with others in their community who, due to sickness, decrepitude or other bad fortune, suffered from temporary or lasting deprivation. This perception of chronic but shared poverty within the village community ensured that the colonial government did not feel any obligation sooner or later to provide relief for a large agrarian mass unable to fend for themselves. Acceptance of Boeke's economic dualism prevented government care for the poor from extending to what was seen as the corporate and subsistence-based agrarian economy. Ignoring and obfuscating the rank inequality within the village community in the ownership of farmland and the rights associated with it contributed to this ill-considered assessment.

The suggestion of shared poverty linked to Boeke's theory of static expansion completely disregarded the dispossessed underclasses bound in servitude to land-owning households as farm servants, sharecroppers or tenants, and obliged them to provide a wide range of services to the village leaders. This already dire existence at the base of society was made even more desperate by the trend towards proletarianization unfolding in the peasant economy. A growing class of land-poor and landless farm labourers were forced to seek income away from their own villages. Designated and derogated as coolies, this footloose class found casual employment on plantations, on infrastructural works or in nearby towns and cities. The continual coming and going weakened household links in their villages of origin, but prevented them from indefinitely settling down anywhere else. It often resulted in a nomadic way of life marked by disruption and indigence.

Widespread destitution was at the start of the twentieth century, euphemistically recorded as an indication of 'diminished well-being'. That lack of, or further decline in, well-being needed to be addressed and a package of measures was announced. This levelling-up approach, labelled as Ethical Policy, aroused considerable ire among the ruling elite, in the belief that it would generate unrest among the Indonesian population.

Any comparison with the social question, which had encouraged the working classes in the metropole to demand a better deal, was dismissed as nonsense. As Boeke had said, the 'native was not poor but different'. Such criticisms of the ambition to improve the lot of the impoverished class of the peasantry did not however prevent the 'economic plight of the people' – a euphemism for indigence – from gradually receiving more attention. After the abolition of the cultivation system, those at the bottom continued to suffer under a heavy tax burden, now levied in cash. In his 'debt of honour' appeal, C.T. van Deventer (1899) drew attention to the imbalance between that burden and their capacity to pay. In an extensive study, Van Deventer (1904) documented his observation of a spiral of growing comfort in the mother country set against the impoverishment of the colony. Pieter Brooshooft, who coined the term 'Ethical Policy', calculated that around the turn of the century Javanese peasants paid a quarter of their paltry household budget in tax to the government (1901: 31). A turn for the better would need to be accompanied by a reduction in that excruciating burden. But that did not happen because the principle of cheap governance required that the population themselves raised the costs of their colonial subjection.

While any reference to the social struggle for labour rights and political democracy raging in the Netherlands was avoided as misplaced and inappropriate, social Darwinism and the associated dogma of racial superiority were warmly endorsed in the colonial milieu. These bourgeois ideas had become very popular in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century and found fertile ground in the apartheid policy of the colonial state.

An official study on pauperism among people of European stock in the Netherlands Indies at the turn of the century confirmed the suspected link between destitution, work-shyness, immorality and criminality (Van Rees and De Graaff 1901-2). The racist element added to these findings was that such undesirable qualities were found mainly among those of mixed blood. Racial blending, it was warned, led to downward social mobility and ultimately pauperism. Governor-general W. Rooseboom (1899-1904) noted that the children of Indonesian women left behind by their European fathers were ostracized and led a homeless existence around villages and urban *kampungs*. A book on the Dutch East Indies, edited by Hendrikus Colijn, later prime minister of the Netherlands, contained a chapter that condemned the Indo-Europeans in unambiguous colonial-racist terms:

> Most of those in this group are half-bloods who have not had proper education, often because their fathers have left them, and who feel that their European blood makes them too good for manual labour, while

> they have not had or not taken the opportunity to qualify for office work. They drift between the indigenous and European communities, living from hand to mouth and comprise an unhappy, dissatisfied and harmful segment of the population. (Muller 1912, 372-73)

Lack of character and an aversion to regular work were among the discriminatory accusations standardly aimed at the brown-skinned community. Placing Indo-European children in orphanages and re-educating them was a matter for private charity, preferably by Christian missionaries. The care devoted to them prevented beggary and theft, and disruptions of the public order in general, boiling over into anti-colonial activity. Their training was intended to teach them decency, but should not be too European in nature, as those who completed it successfully would inevitably end up back in autochthonous society. Even a small number of white Europeans did not return to the homeland at the end of their working lives but, lacking sufficient income, were reduced to a *kampung* existence. Such a downslide eroded the dignity attributed to high-caste ethnicity and brought together ways of life that were not meant to be fused in racial blending. The pauperism of this white residue was of such concern to the government that it decided to alleviate their indigence. The racialized undertone of this intervention prevented it from extending to the colonial underclass. The dogma of shared poverty and the associated duty of care for those in one's own community meant that Indonesian pauperization could be kept beyond the sight and reach of government policy. Fears of increasing pauperism within the Eurasian community seemed to have been allayed by the early decades of the twentieth century. This was due to the expansion of the colonial bureaucracy and the continuing growth of private capitalist enterprise. Rising employment in both the formal and informal sectors of the economy led to decreasing poverty, also among the least-skilled segments of the Indo-European community. Nevertheless, public care for the poor lagged far behind the need for it.

Impact of the economic crisis in the early 1930s

The depression that broke out in the global economy at the end of the 1920s struck the East Indies with unprecedented severity. The archipelago was a major supplier of raw materials and agricultural commodities that were sold mainly on Western markets. The decline in production led to a mass exodus from large-scale agriculture and mining, but the crisis affected all

sectors of industry, resulting in a wave of redundancies that impacted on the whole workforce.

Table 9.1. The changing size of the workforce in agro-industry, mining and government service, 1929-1934 (in thousands) ⏎

Main branches of employment	1929	1930	1932	1934	Decrease between 1929 and 1932	Decrease in %
1. Sugar estates (mainly on Java)	131.7	130.1	97.1	28.6	103.1	78
2. Plantations (East Coast of Sumatra)	424.9	387.4	217.8	197.2	227.7	54
3. Mines						
a. Coal	15.0	17.1	8.8	7.2	7.8	52
b. Tin	41.0	36.4	15.8	9.7	30.3	77
c. Petroleum	31.9	29.0	15.8	12.4	19.5	61
d. Gold and silver	8.6	9.0	5.3	5.3	3.3	38
4. Salt extraction						
a. Government enterprises	149.1	127.4	52.2	42.9	106.2	71
b. Small-scale workshops	8.0	8.9	8.0	8.0	-	0
5. Government service	300.0	290.0	258.3	200.0	100.0	33
Totals	1110.2	1035.3	679.1	511.3	598.9	54

Source: Table in Creutzberg (1972-75: vol. 2, 779).

The decrease shown in the table does not include the continued loss of employment in 1934. The trend of impoverishment persisted even after the crisis had passed its deepest point in 1935. The coolie budget study in 1939-40 noted that labourers on sugar estates along the coast of West Java had a daily food intake of 959 calories, while for peasants in surrounding villages it was 1,159. That was lower than the average for plantation labourers for the whole of Java, which was less than 1,300 calories. At one of the sugar plantations in this region – where I happened to conduct my investigations in the postcolonial era – these daily intakes fell to 652 and 894 calories (Wertheim 1953; Huizenga 1958). The coolie budget report confirmed official findings that during these years of crisis people were known to live on two and a half cents a day (Rutgers 1946: 207).

These figures and other quantitative data relate to regulated, and thus registered, employment. They do not inform us on labour time and wages lost outside this statistical overview of the formal economy. This includes not only workers dismissed by employers but also the large majority accustomed or forced to meet their basic needs at their own risk and expense. That means

that by far the largest percentage of those who lost their jobs and incomes remained outside the officially recorded employment figures. Partly for this reason, I accept the argument, highlighted, for example, by Van Doorn (1994) that the crisis was of disastrous proportions. Boomgaard, however, considers this is an overly pessimistic assessment. He agrees that dire need did occur and affected some more than others. But in his view, the decline was not as bad in general terms as is portrayed and the first signs of recovery were already visible in 1935 (Boomgaard 2000: 46). His opinion totally ignores, however, the available source material, including the report *Werkloosheid in Nederlandsch-Indië* (Unemployment in the Netherlands Indies) published by the colonial Labour Office in 1935 (Kantoor van Arbeid 1935). While wages did fall for those still in work in the formal economy, their living standards actually rose as prices fell more quickly. The fall in income affected all, from high to low, but there is no doubt that it led to severe deprivation among the classes at the bottom of the economy. The official recognition of destitution extended no further than the provision of relief for the victims of the looming economic crisis belonging to the white caste (Bosma and Raben 2008: 228-36). While racial mixing was unavoidable in the workplace, it was structured in a clear and multi-coloured hierarchy. By contrast, in the late-colonial era, residential areas were segregated zones, precluding social interaction with non-whites other than as domestic servants.

Ingleson has described in detail the worsening in living conditions suffered by the reserve army of labourers in the urban informal economy (Ingleson 1988, 2012, 2015). The impact of the crisis on the more densely populated and badly affected countryside did receive less attention and has been studied in less detail. Government agencies did not bother to gather data on the deprivation experienced by the huge agrarian multitude. Policymakers kept describing the staggering poverty among the Indonesian workforce as 'diminishing welfare'. The high command of the colonial bureaucracy repeatedly made clear that it had no budget available to provide support for the multi-coloured ranks of the population. The *Indisch Verslag* (Indies report) for 1930 continued to insist that the decline in well-being was by far not as serious as had been claimed (1931-32, vol. 1, 412).

My conclusion is that the outbreak of the global crisis at the end of the 1920s of course intensified the distribution of economic and social inequality along racial lines. While the multi-layered Indo-European community experienced major setbacks, the scale and intensity of distress among the Indonesian population at the bottom of the heap was more extreme but remained undocumented. Their continued confinement in the stagnating but polarized village economy and the safety net of mutual assistance that was

assumed to still be intact endured in policymaking as a persistent illusion of self-reliance. It was a misconception that took no account of the monetization that had also taken place in the peasant economy and which had resulted in rising indebtedness. In the foregoing years, a shortage of regular, paid employment had forced a large proportion of the land-poor and landless out of the village economy. Unable to secure a contract for employment in large-scale agriculture or mining elsewhere in the archipelago, many of this dispossessed mass drifted between their villages and an array of short-term worksites in the countryside or the urban economy:

> Casual day-wage labourers were not included in the statistics even when they were permanent urban residents. Low-skilled workers and casual day-wage labourers were a large proportion of the Indonesian urban workforce. The statistics also do not reflect the tens of thousands of urban wage earners who retreated to inland towns or villages when they could obtain no further work in the major cities. (Ingleson 2015: 1641)

Lacking property to sell, this footloose proletariat was the first to fall prey to pauperization.

The informal economy – always a reservoir for seasonal, irregular and low-paid labour – was now flooded with superfluous labour squeezed out of the formal economy. This bloated mass had to compete with each other for the meagre income they needed for their bare survival. The far-reaching reductions in the government's budget during the crisis years also led to radical downsizing of the colonial machinery. As a consequence of the wholesale abolition of departments or divisions, the bureaucratic apparatus was cut back considerably, as can be seen from Table 9.1. That could mean dismissal or unpaid leave, as well as repeated salary cuts, on all levels. Progressive rises in the financial deficit as the crisis deepened limited the government's efforts to tackle impoverishment among its own employees. Implementing public works, a tried and tested remedy for restricting the impact of crises, offered no solace. Lack of funds was by no means the only or even the main reason. Adequate information on the state of distress at the broad base of the economy was not solicited and illustrated the government's lack of reach and insight into the scale and intensity of the misery. This hiatus in knowledge was a consequence of the a priori denial that such misery existed. The government resolutely refused to take action on a request from the People's Council to set up an inquiry into the problem. The economic recession was further exacerbated by the monetary cutbacks imposed on the colony by the metropolitan headquarters.

The care for the poor that the government did provide was not aimed at crisis management but on alleviating acute deprivation. And that, too, was implemented highly selectively. The only groups that qualified for support were besides Europeans, the higher ranks of Indonesian staff who were dismissed from government posts. This preferential treatment was justified with the argument that unemployed members of the white elite had no family around them to help them out and did not have the option of making a livelihood in the informal economy. Financial distress forced Europeans who had hit on hard times to seek shelter in the *kampung*, in the midst of the multi-coloured population. The support available to them was intended to prevent this social downfall, as it breached the racial barrier between two different ways of life. The homeland press warned that this would have ominous consequences for the prestige ascribed to the white caste.

> A white 'sahib' peddling matches in the streets was almost a daily apparition. One needs to consider the adverse consequences this would have for social interaction based on the unspoken acknowledgement of the superiority of the Western races, a small number of whom are accustomed to lead and educate tens of millions of Orientals. Some of the elements on which their domination depends will undoubtedly disappear. It is primarily for this reason that the unemployment of Europeans in the Indies should be regarded with much alarm since it is bound to have a major impact on colonial-political relationships. (*De Telegraaf*, 24 November 1932)

The meagre financial assistance provided by the government was meant to pre-empt such a major erosive impact on both sides of the colour bar. The muted attempt to tackle poverty among Indonesian officials was also based on fears that their growing dissatisfaction would undermine colonial rule. The cutbacks affecting these much lower-paid civil servants, most of whom came from the Indonesian gentry and had received a Western-style education, were far greater than those suffered by their white superiors. Besides their income, they also lost the status that came with working as a civil servant. It was not unthinkable that these dismissed officials and the milieu to which they belonged would turn against the established order and fall prey to the growing calls for liberation from foreign domination. If this risk of defection could be bought off with a small redundancy payment, it was a small price to pay for the continued loyalty of this influential group to their colonial bosses.

The beginnings of a recovery were observed with relief in 1936, but not without mention of the hardships suffered in the crisis years. The president

of the Employers' Association for the Netherlands Indies did not fail to praise the patience of the humble folk who had helped shore up the Dutch empire to the limits of its capacity. But how genuine was that gratitude? The wages paid to coolies remained frozen for many years at the minimum rate shelled out during the crisis. And just how accurate was the so-admired acquiescence of the Indonesian masses? Van Doorn is sceptical of this image in his assessment of the aftermath of the crisis, which led to long-term unemployment for many and a shortage of work for an unprecedented number of others: 'It will always remain a mystery to what extent this gigantic regression and the mass pauperization that accompanied it contributed to the social and political revolution that would erupt less than ten years later' (Van Doorn 1994: 244).

The national movement in search of support

One of the most persistent colonial fables was that the government successfully prevented the independence movement from gaining the support of the masses for its cause. It was claimed that, until the end, this ambition found little fertile ground at the base of the occupied society. This perception, however, ignored the susceptibility of the masses to nationalist ideas and how that deepened as a consequence of the economic decline of the crisis years. The government's failure to address the impoverishment of the Indonesian people contributed to the growing popularity, now also in the countryside, of the call for *merdeka*, freedom and independence.

Efforts to combat this threat focused on its leaders. By arresting and prosecuting them, the government tried to staunch the spread of the call for freedom. In 1927, Mohammed Hatta, later vice president of Indonesia but at that time still a student at the Netherlands School of Economics in Rotterdam, was arrested for violating the article outlawing incitement to hatred. Charged with disturbing the peace and inciting political unrest, he attacked colonial rule in an essay entitled 'Indonesië Vrij!' ('Indonesia free!'). It is a categorical litany against race hate, class-based justice and the discrimination that forced the Indonesian people to bow to the idea of white superiority. His lawyer quoted elaborately from the colonial Dutch language press to point out the offensive way in which Indonesians were portrayed. In his written defence, Hatta debunked as foolish the idea that conversion to Christianity would pave the way to a retention of colonialism and declared that the right to freedom could no longer be denied to the people of Indonesia.

> Year in, year out, Indonesians have lived under the influence of this colonial hypnosis, until they themselves also believe in their own powerlessness and the indispensability of the foreign ruler to give them leadership. The imposed subalternity fits the Dutch colonial spirit which is based on the idea that Indonesia must forever remain a profitable appendage to Dutch ownership.... Day in, day out, we are told insistently that Indonesians do not possess the capacities to lead, that they are not capable of showing initiative, so that they are from birth destined to work under European supervision. (Hatta 1928: 62-63)

The same fate befell Sutan Sjahrir, the first prime minister of Indonesia after independence. Together with Hatta, he was first banished to Digoel, the notorious penal detention centre in the jungle of New Guinea, where the ringleaders of the 1926-27 insurrection were also interned. Both leaders were subsequently relocated to Banda where Sjahrir wrote his memoirs on his collision course with the colonial state that denied him the right of citizenship. He elaborated at length, as Hatta had done, about the racism inherent in colonialism. Millions of Indonesians, the mass of the population, were degraded to the status of genetic inferiors. No 'welfarism' or 'Ethical Policy' can disguise this fact, was his conclusion after eight years in detention.

When Sukarno founded a broad-based political platform in 1927, the Perserikatan Nasional Indonesia (PNI) was launched as an association to prevent it from becoming immediately banned. When, the following year, the PNI was renamed as a party, the authorities did not wait long to respond to this daring provocation. In his defence plea after his arrest as the indisputable leader of the joint front set up for national unity, Sukarno compared the swelling resistance to imperialism with the struggle of the proletariat for emancipation in Europe (Soekarno 1931: 41-42).

After quashing the 1926-27 rebellion, governor-general C.D. de Graeff had felt compelled to renounce the last remnants of the Ethical Policy. The much-reduced space left for cultivating Indonesian consciousness led in his view to widening of the gap between white and brown. This outcome, he concluded with dismay, was accompanied by the flaring up of racial instincts. His successor, B.C. de Jonge, had no qualms at all about replacing patronizing tutelage with extremely severe oppression. An advocate of large-scale and expatriate capitalism – as CEO of Bataafse Petroleum Maatschappij (Batavian Oil Company, BPM, later Royal Dutch Shell) – he was a proponent of a near-fascist policy. As governor-general, he did not hide his sympathy for Anton Mussert when the leader of the Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging in Nederland (National Socialist Movement in the Netherlands, NSB) came

on a visit to propagate his ideology, which had spread like wildfire among the white and Indo-European community. His ban in 1933-34 of parties that campaigned for the nationalist movement was paralleled by an aversion to anything that smacked of the Ethical Policy.

The absence during the crisis years of a revival of insurgent radical activity should not be interpreted as docile acceptance of colonial authority. Indonesia was modelled as an authoritarian state that confined the subaltern population in a straightjacket of repressive tolerance. In the words of J.S. Furnivall, who was intimately acquainted with the late-colonial setting, no villager on Java could scratch his head without an expert to show him how to do it and a local official to give him permission. But did this unbridled surveillance over every aspect of daily life not come up against a wall of unwillingness, evasion, escape, silence and covert to overt sabotage? In my view, suggestions that the colonized population remained pliable to colonial rule and offered little resistance were triggered by the Eurocentric perspective underlying them. Such wishful thinking inevitably results in underexposure of the way in which the Indonesian population created its own room for manoeuvre and made itself resilient, individually or collectively. The historiography of the Dutch East Indies has never shown much interest in this opposite point of view, looking through the Indonesian lens. Moreover, ruthless repression should not be disregarded as the cause of apparent acquiescence. Where resistance did show its face, its initiators and leaders were instantly prosecuted and severely punished. In his memoirs, De Jonge is condescending about his predecessors and their policy of levelling up: '[T]hey spoke of the independence of Indonesia as something acceptable, a question of time and not even of a long time.' At a conference of high-ranking Dutch and Indonesian officials of the civil service held shortly before his departure in 1936, the penultimate governor-general stated with self-confidence that there was no question of unrest among the Indonesian population: 'This good, calm, patient people, ruled by men of position and status like the regents, must be able to live in peace, if only the few malevolent elements can be kept in check' (quoted in Van den Doel 1996: 247).

Racial identity was the constituent principle of the colonial state. It was a form of domination that benefited a very small part of the population while disadvantaging the great majority. That division was based on colour and split the Indonesian ranks into compartments of relative to far-reaching privilege and protection and, at the other end of the spectrum, deprivation and repression for the overwhelming majority.

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10 The Religious Fervour of Ethical Politics

> History teaches us that any contact between the white race and the dark-skinned people has resulted in the subjugation of the latter by the former. This experience has convinced the black races that the white race is a higher form of being, and that it is the destiny of both that the one should dominate over the other.
> – J.-C. Baud, quoted in Duymaer van Twist, *Algemeen overzigt van de staatkundige gesteldheid van Nederlandsch Indië over 1852* (1855: 314-315)

The rise of liberal imperialism

There has never been a dearth of dissenters fulminating against colonial policies in the homeland. Their critical voices preceded the introduction by the end of the nineteenth century of what came to be known as 'ethical policies'. Multatuli, the pen name of Eduard Douwes Dekker, was undeniably the most vocal, deriding Dutch rule as brutally malicious (Multatuli 1860). His vehement charge, launched from within the colonial apparatus, which did not yet extend far and wide in the Indonesian archipelago, concerned the forced labour imposed on the peasantry of Java. It was already practiced in the early days of the East Indies Company, but climaxed in the cultivation system as managed by the colonial state. Between 1830 and 1870, landowners in the well-settled parts of Java were obligated to grow, process and deliver cash crops to the government warehouses for sale on the global market, as well as render other forms of corvée labour (Breman 2015). Wolter Robert van Hoëvell was another strong opponent who took the colonial machinery to task in a journal which he edited and circulated. His condemnation of the slavery practiced in Java and more emphatically so in Suriname marked him as one of the moral-minded epigones who, in the slipstream of the political upheaval in 1848, found some resonance among the homeland bourgeoisie (Van Hoëvell 1848). It is a kind of critique grounded in spiritual enlightenment and therefore seems to resemble the ethical policies which surfaced half a century later. However, these early appeals to righteous rule were neither anti-colonial in their critique nor did they impinge on the received wisdom on how to operate. Moreover, they played no role in the political debate leading to the abolition of the cultivation system in 1870. Even when declared as an article of faith, virtuous morality was not

necessarily attuned to the selected concrete policy objectives. In his 1879 *Our Program*, Abraham Kuyper, the founding father of the Anti-Revolutionaire Partij (Anti-Revolutionary Party, ARP), took the ethical high ground in his deliberations on what colonialism ought to entail. He wanted to break with self-interest as its guiding principle and instead pledged to promote the wholesome advancement of the subjected population.

Steadily building up his profile as a conservative politician, Kuyper was much admired for his religious zeal by a sizable vote bank among the petty bourgeoisie leaning to fundamentalist Christianity. He became prime minister in 1901, heading a conservative cabinet of Christian parties. One of the disciples in the devoted entourage surrounding him was Alexander Willem Frederik Idenburg. After a twenty-year military career as a high-ranking officer in the colonial army, he had turned to politics. In 1901, at the recommendation of his party's supremo, Idenburg was first nominated member of parliament for the ARP and the following year appointed as minister of colonies.

This essay focuses on Idenburg's role in the take-off stage of what were labelled as ethical policies. In this endeavour, he was preceded by Kuyper as his coach-cum-tutor and, later, flanked by Hendrikus Colijn as his successor. Both of them have had in my opinion a more significant and lasting footprint on Dutch governance overseas. However, this perspective was assessed differently in a recently published intellectual biography of Idenburg (Van der Jagt 2021). Hans van der Jagt has identified him as the harbinger of the ethical policies. Although in his official postings Idenburg tried to promote a better way of life for the people of Indonesia than they had enjoyed in the past, Van der Jagt's portrayal does not conceal the dark side of his colonial rule, which was to switch from benign accommodation to stern repression whenever the call for freedom was raised. It is a make-believe kind of appraisal with which I strongly disagree.

To begin with, the need for ethical politics was initially not identified in converting the predominantly Muslim population to Christianity as foregrounded in the ARP's colonial agenda. The call for a policy of levelling up was raised around the turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, when the impoverishment of the Indonesian population had become a public issue. Pieter Brooshooft was a major path breaker of this disconcerting insight. In a series of newspaper articles, he pressed for relief from existential distress and launched the term 'ethical polities', in which he elaborated on how to achieve them by lowering the heavy taxation levied in both cash and kind (through corvée labour). To document the growing misery, he specifically referred to the wretched life of the coolies who were contracted for employment on the large agricultural estates

opened up on the East Coast of Sumatra (Brooshooft 1901). In 1899, Conrad Theodor van Deventer contributed to the now raging debate from another perspective when he proposed to end the annual drainage of colonial profits to the homeland (Van Deventer 1899). Van Deventer said that this financial flow out of the East Indies, a huge amount of capital, should be paid back as 'a debt of honour' to be used for funding the institutional and infrastructural development of the colony. In her year-end speech from the throne in 1901, Queen Wilhelmina urged respect for the moral calling to which her Christian nation was duty bound. As minister, Idenburg was indeed the first politician to operationalize this task and, nearly a decade later, to shape it more concretely in the fabric of regular decision-making as governor-general of the East Indies. To comprehend how he framed the charge entrusted to him, it is of crucial relevance to highlight that his governance was driven by an ethos of Christian fundamentalism. There is no consensus on how to qualify his handling of this noble objective over the time span of its practice. I am inclined to rate it as coincidental with Idenburg's presence on the colonial platform both in the circuit at home and overseas. A hesitant and lukewarm start in the first few years did not augur well for its continued success. Having already been officially downgraded in the second decade of the twentieth century, it further faded away in the onset of straightforward authoritarianism to quell the steadily rising tide of nationalist fervour. This is an assessment which needs to be qualified in more detail.

The Christian gospel

In the early twentieth century the ARP occupied a major niche in the not yet democratized political landscape of the Netherlands. The colonial policy which Kuyper had outlined in *Our Program* remained the manual with which the main governmental policymakers of orthodox Christian persuasion – Idenburg at first, then joined by Colijn who soon overshadowed his predecessor – mapped its course during the late-colonial era. In his study, Van der Jagt has highlighted the paradoxical symbiosis of good and bad colonialism. In his view, this implied, on the one hand, the brutal and consolidated occupation of overseas territories and, on the other hand, efforts to induce the colonized inhabitants to follow a benevolent course leading to their advancement. According to Van de Jagt, Idenburg was the designated advocate and architect par excellence to achieve this double bind. Though phrased as a new gestalt, it was the conventional proposition

of colonialism as a civilizing mission as already stated in those terms in the party catechism which Kuyper had drafted.

The ARP's helmsman had curtly rejected exploitation of the peasantry as the organizing principle of colonial politics. Under the cultivation system, colonial management had in his view turned into a commercial enterprise:

> This profit flowed from labour that remained unpaid. It was extorted from the Javanese so that we could restore order to our disordered finances, make tax rises at home superfluous and allow the state to indulge in the luxury that corrupted our political system. (Kuyper 2015: para. 252)

Replacing it by free enterprise financed by expatriate capital, however, had not discarded the use of force and the habitus of greed. Economic liberalism was no less selfish and devoted to maximizing profits and had to be replaced by true guardianship to redeem the population from backwardness. Directing how this could be achieved, Kuyper declared that colonies had to be regarded as subjected to imperial rule rather than being part of it. Homeland and faraway domains should be seen as interconnected but distinctly separate entities. Dissimilar from each other in origin and history, they were interrelated not in juxtaposition but in superposition versus subordination. His clarification was an early choice in favour of association above assimilation: 'Spatial separation of the constituent parts will prevent that in the parliament of the kingdom a Dayak will ever be seated next to a Frisian or an Acehnese next to a Dutch citizen.' Guided by tutelage, the inhabitants of the Indies would follow a path to progress while retaining their own identity. Its outcome depended on divine commandment but Kuyper remained at the ready to act as spokesman for the Messiah.

The 1901-5 cabinet chaired by 'Abraham the Great' in a coalition of Christian parties steered colonial politics in accordance with the directives originally established in *Our Program.* Its conceptualization indicated that instead of 'What can we get out of Java?', the question ought to be 'What does God want us to contribute to Java?' Whether independence would ultimately be the consequence of coming of age was again attributed to divine discretion. Kuyper took for granted that the Dutch presence overseas would have to be enduring in order to complete the mission of Christianization. He did not mince words in clarifying that conversion to Christianity was preconditional to advancement. It was a path to blissful progress which could not be paved in reverse order. His appeal expressed a determined confrontational attitude to nations considered inferior. However, colonial logistics saw to it that this crusade was nipped in the bud. Fear of offending

the Muslim majority was the main reason for political restraint. Added to this was the lax or even absent religiosity of the white community which ruled the official and civil roost in the Indies. In the private correspondence between Kuyper and Idenburg, the latter complained bitterly of the lack of hearing he found for the basic tenets of their orthodox creed among the Dutch-language press in the Indies. The ordinance which he had issued for compliance with Sunday rest was denounced as a clear example of the governor-general's holier-than-thou credentials.

Quite unexpectedly installed as minister in 1902, Idenburg's ethical bearings were immediately scrutinized. Johannes van den Brand had appealed to Christian conscience in his indictment of the prevailing system of indenture backed up with penal sanctions to which the workforce on the plantations on Sumatra's East Coast were confined (Van den Brand 1902). In *De Getuige* (The witness), a magazine addressing the front ranks of the ARP, he repeatedly informed his fellow believers and party members, with substantial documentation, about the inhuman treatment meted out to Chinese and Javanese coolies. As already discussed in Chapter 5, the colonial bureaucracy had dismissed his allegations as a fairy tale, but more factual evidence was required to put a shocked public opinion in the homeland at ease. An official from the Department of Justice was sent to Sumatra to carry out investigations in the plantation belt. Having retrieved this commissioned report, which was kept hidden in the colonial archives, I found on the first page Idenburg's handwritten note: 'A miserable history of suffering and injustice'. But when the East Indies' budget was discussed in the Netherlands parliament in the autumn of 1904, it became abundantly clear that the minister of colonies would go to any length to prevent disclosure of the contents of the submitted report. His official reason for refusing to give MPs access to the document was that those who had been accused of misdeeds or other reprehensible actions had not been given the opportunity to defend themselves against the charges. Moreover, publication would not serve any useful purpose. Rather than dwell on what happened in the past, he wanted to concentrate on improvements for the future. It was only after considerable pressure, including from members of friendly parties which formed the ruling coalition, that the minister finally though reluctantly agreed to outline the principal conclusions of the report (Breman 1989: 7-8).

The leadership of the Planters' Association in Deli insisted that bonded labour was indispensable to the flourishing of Sumatra's plantation industry and could not be removed from the coolie contract. Idenburg agreed that penal sanctions on the estates of Deli were a necessary evil to secure labour control. He also and readily gave in to the pressure of the capitalist estate

management to more rigorous forms of punishment for workers who dared to protest against being held captive at the site of employment and stood up to the brutalities imposed on them. But in 1913 he resisted introduction of the penal sanction also in Java which had been urged by corporate agrarian capitalism, because in his view labour was abundantly and cheaply available there.

Grandstanding on this occasion his felicitous ostentation as imbued by Christian morality, he wrote in a letter to Kuyper:

> [I]it needs far more strength and courage to resist for many months the daily pressure to do what would please 'capital' and would not be found distasteful by many government officials. But in doing so I should have acted against my own conscience. (Brouwer 1958: 30-31)

The manner in which Idenburg dealt with this issue exemplifies in my opinion his duplicitous posture. On the one hand, he readily caved in to the pressure exerted by big business and, on the other, persisted in pretending that he declined to bow to injustice. It was an ambiguity which would remain a consistent trait of his official habitus.

The religious impetus Kuyper attached to colonialism had become a rare phenomenon during the high tide of Europe's territorial imperialism. Neither 'the white man's burden' clamour in Britain nor '*la mission civilisatrice*' which heralded French expansion in overseas territories – preconditioned conversion to Christianity as a requisite feature in the slow passage eventually culminating in civilized behaviour. No doubt, underlying the urge to subject other lands and their ethnicities was the claim to superiority of the colonizing nation. Instead of resorting to undiluted racism, Kuyper had highlighted this licence by laying stress on the inferior creeds of these nations. In his view:

> Only the Christian nations in Europe and America have attained that purer disclosure of nobler strength that has created human society as we know it, a society to which the former – and in part still present – heathen civilizations in China and British India can in no way be compared. The Islamic way of life in disintegrating Turkey, meanwhile, and the barbaric customs of the West Asian tribes stand self-condemned. (Kuyper 2015: para. 257)

In the parliamentary debate on how to shape ethical policies in the Dutch East Indies, priority was given to combatting the growing poverty of the

autochthonous population. 'Declining welfare' was the term used in the official registration of this trend. Relief from too heavy a tax levied both in cash and labour power from the average peasant household in Java was badly required, as Brooshooft had persuasively shown. To qualify Idenburg as an energetic instigator and manager of this objective, as Van der Jagt has done, fails to take into account the reluctant and evasive manner in which he proceeded to realize this political promise.

Lack of vigour and ambition needed to reach the weakly defined target was not only indicative of the low-key approach with which the minister handled his charge. The whole colonial apparatus lacked stamina to pursue and achieve this goal. This did not apply, however, to Jacques Henry Abendanon, who had been in 1900 appointed director of education, worship and industry. Burdened with this quaint mixture of departmental tasks, the senior official, a descendant of a notable West Indian family, was highly exceptional in his radical bent to serve the interests of the Indonesian people. The talk he held in 1900 for members of the Indisch Genootschap (Indies Society) in The Hague criticized colonial rule for instigating exploitation, war and racism. His audience, colleagues and others close to the bureaucratic apparatus, lambasted his account as a gross distortion of the truth; they rejected his accusations as baseless and unfitting for a civil servant (Bregman 2012). To verify in more detail the trend of declining welfare, Idenburg had commissioned Abendanon to suggest how artisanal production could be upgraded to small-scale industry, which would create additional employment and income for the dispossessed classes of the peasantry. His findings and proposals were anathema to the lobby of corporate plantation business which wanted to consolidate its control over an unlimited supply of reserve labour that could be hired and fired at need. Giving in to this pressure, the colonial high command and Idenburg himself rejected the recommendations Abendanon had made in his report as too idealistic and ambitious. In similar vein, Idenburg swept aside the plea of this high-ranking official to consider education as a crucial instrument for uniting races and nations. Disillusioned at having failed to find a hearing for his policies, Abendanon left his job and the Indies in 1905 (Van Miert 1991).

Idenburg's colonial service record was impressive. He officiated three times as minister of colonies (1902-5, 1908-9 and 1918-19) and was in between governor of Suriname (1905-8) and governor-general of the Dutch East Indies (1909-16). The crucial question is whether he indeed became a committed practitioner and successful achiever of ethical policies in these front-rank positions. In my critical assessment, I endorse Elspeth Locher-Scholten's definition of this objective: 'A policy meant to bring under effective Dutch

authority the length and breadth of the Indonesian archipelago and the development directed to self-rule under Dutch leadership modelled in a Western fabric' (1981: 201).

Colonial practice

The fall of the rightist Kuyper cabinet in 1905 forced Idenburg on his dismissal as minister to accept the governorship of Suriname. He did so reluctantly, in order to earn a comfortable living, and while on the boat to the West Indies, wrote to his wife at home: '[T]he colony is languishing and its population does not seem to excel in virtuous merits and propensities' (De Bruijn and Puchinger 1985: 33). He did not change that opinion during his tenure in the West Indies and wrote a year afterwards that he was 'governor over a shambles' (De Bruijn and Puchinger 1985: 34). In Van der Jagt's more optimistic judgement, Idenburg proved himself an able manager of governance who achieved important reforms, also in Suriname. Nevertheless, the majority of its inhabitants remained trapped in poverty. This colony had lost its fame as a profit-earning part of the Dutch empire and had become a burden, at considerable cost to the homeland.

Suriname's desolate state of affairs had to be remedied, as Kuyper attested in his lament about how miserable and sad the conditions in this colony were:

> Of its nearly 60,000 square miles, little more than 200 – yes, 200 – square miles are under cultivation. Its population is no larger than the single city of Utrecht. Its mortality rate exceeds its birth rate. Production has decreased to a tenth of former days. Idol worship, according to the latest Colonial Report, is on the increase. Plantation after plantation lies deserted. Every year we have to make up Suriname's deficit with several hundred thousand [guilders]. In public opinion, for anyone to go to the West Indies is such a sure sign of his general uselessness that the state of Suriname society has little to write home about. (Kuyper 2015: para. 276)

In *Our Program*, he had outlined how the quagmire could be set right again. Improvement could be attained by sending both capital and labour to 'this enticing colony'. To revitalize plantation production now that slavery had been abolished, the government should facilitate immigration from elsewhere, so that Chinese and other coolies (from British India and Java) could settle on the estates to constitute its workforce. To pre-empt the risk of mutiny, missionaries needed to be encouraged to spread the Christian

gospel among these coolies to keep them in check. Kuyper's sermon of directives was meant to result in a feudal relationship between planters and labourers which he deemed to be beneficial to both parties.

In the aftermath of the abolition of slavery in 1863, the sustained economic malaise had sparked a spirit of defiance and rebellion, of which Anton de Kom was the mouthpiece (De Kom 1934). Accused of agitation, he was arrested in 1933 and extradited a few months later by the governor of Suriname, who happened to be Idenburg's son-in-law. Idenburg himself also resorted to this method of allaying fomenting protest as part of the so-called exorbitant rights with which political dissenters were already prosecuted during his official tenure as governor-general in the Indies.

The gradual fizzling out of ethical politics was not only caused by a lack of decisive action but also by the narrow scope for its implementation. Idenburg drew the line when and where more was claimed than permitted by the rigorous maintenance of colonial authority. His biographer illustrates this lack of leniency by referring to the crackdown on resistance whenever the population or their frontmen took a stance against authority. Missing in that explanation is the notion that cause and effect may have operated in the opposite direction; that is, increased intolerance of covert or suspected dissonance led to harsher repression, which resulted in a backlash in growing support of the nationalist movement. This reverse trend could certainly be discerned during the 1920s in Java and had earlier been manifest in the wars declared on the sultanate of Aceh in North Sumatra during the final quarter of the nineteenth century. With a record of two decades of service in the colonial army, ending with a high-ranking posting in the general staff, Idenburg – together with Colijn, who followed a similar military-to-civil career – contributed as heavyweights to this theatre of extreme violence. The war crimes committed over a long period by the Koninklijk Nederlands Indisch Leger (Royal Netherlands East Indies Army, KNIL) were dismissed by both Kuper and Idenburg in parliamentary debates as having been instigated by the zealotry of the Muslim inhabitants. The fanatical racism to which the KNIL rank and file were driven by their commanding officers led not only to sustained warfare but also triggered off a strengthening of religious belief.

The claim of benign colonialism did not last for much more than one and half decades. It was a short hiccup of good intentions, much underfunded and which did not find favour outside officialdom but met with opposition from both white expatriates and the non-Indonesian minorities. Idenburg sparingly allowed modest forms of civil congregation. Associational initiatives among the somewhat better-off sections of the Indonesian population

were not prohibited as long as such organizations had no radical motives and did not amalgamate in nationwide unions. In the wake of World War I, revolutionary stirrings in Europe also reached the Netherlands and for a short moment seemed to spiral in a leftist political revolt. Caught unawares, governor-general Johan Paul van Limburg Stirum hastily promised to change the ruling fabric in the Indies. He mandated the recently established Volksraad (People's Council) with ample jurisdiction, hoping to suppress the turmoil. From The Hague, minister Idenburg saw to it that these promises were retracted as speedily as they had been made.

In the portrait Van der Jagt has composed of Idenburg, he is shown as a well-meaning and judicious man with a wide range of laudable qualities such as honesty, sincerity, piety, modesty and righteousness, always willing to reconcile a difference of opinion, eager to avoid a dispute and reach for a compromise. Driven by orthodox religiosity, he exerted himself to support the Christian mission of Calvinism and admitted regretting not finding more space for his pietist credence for fear of kindling religious strife. His forbearance did not tempt him to seek the front rank in politics. He declined to be elected to the leadership of the ARP after Kuyper and also turned down the possibility to succeed his godfather and revered taskmaster as prime minister. With fragile health as excuse, he recommended Colijn for both postings as the better man. How can the qualities which Idenburg made manifest in his colonial career be appraised? His biographer praises him to the heavens in a portrayal arguing that the bad side to colonialism was inherent to foreign rule and that in his role as the man on the spot he did his utmost to brighten the good side. My disagreement with this verdict contradicts the flawed notion that bad and good were summoned up and doled out in equal measure, dependent on the aptitude of colonial subjects to comply or not in their subalternity. In reality, of course, the morality of fair and benevolent rule foundered, not occasionally but systematically, on the harsh bedrock of intransigent law and order. I therefore thoroughly agree with Locher-Scholten's contention that, beyond his governmental handicraft, Idenburg has not left much of a footprint on colonial statecraft (Locher-Scholten 2012). As his earmarked successor, Colijn did not wait long to express that he had no business with 'ethical nonsense' and referred to it as maladroit excesses from which colonial politics should be spared (Colijn 1928).

In a prequel, Van der Jagt suggests that ethical politics were a colonial version of the social question raging in the homelands in the late stage of imperialism. This assessment has to be discarded as absurd. My refutation also concerns the lens which Van der Jagt chose to highlight how Idenburg's

policies and their ideological substantiation matched the code which Alexis de Tocqueville had invoked in his writings and in his manual of statecraft. The value attributed to the teachings of this political philosopher is so profound that Van der Jagt has modelled his biography in accordance with the insights which Tocqueville constructed and applied for the validation of his intellectual framework. However, their alleged like-mindedness thoroughly misapprehends Tocqueville's political leanings in theory and practice. For the sake of brevity, I refer to Chapter 2 in which I have argued that the colonial expansion of France was by no means, as Tocqueville had boasted, a civilizing mission driven by ethical politics. His roundly racist prejudice impinged on his role as recorder of the parliamentary panel which was commissioned to draft the report for the abolition of slavery in the French Caribbean in 1853. Having written the minutes, Tocqueville certified that, rather than the enslaved workforce, their employers were to be financially compensated for their loss of property. Moreover, the enslaved victims remained not only dispossessed from all means of production but were also obligated to continue labouring for their masters for another ten years. These clauses were seamlessly incorporated when, a decade later, the Dutch government ended enslavement in the West Indies.

Van der Jagt does not avoid discussing topics and issues which do not corroborate his profile of Idenburg as a dedicated practitioner of ethical politics. Neither is he shy of bringing up the diatribe against Islam voiced by prominent members of the ARP, replicating in their argumentation the anti-Islam fervour of European hegemony at large (Matthiesen 2023). But the vilification of this creed by Kuyper as 'Mohammedan idolatry' does not figure in Van der Jagt's evocative defence. As a devoted disciple of the party's founder, Idenburg nevertheless sets clear limits to his compliance, backed up by the reputation he had earned as an expert of colonial governance. Van der Jagt eloquently deals with critique which detracts from the laudable account and the pivotal role he has conferred to the subject of his biography. But the pros and cons are not summed up in proportional balance and his praising profile remains unbelievably free from blemishes. The upshot of my comments is that Idenburg was not the towering figure in the late-colonial landscape as portrayed by his biographer and does not deserve the tall pedestal erected for him.

Rather than ending my review on this note, I adopt a wider perspective. To comprehend the modest contribution Idenburg made, his lack of impact needs to be placed in the broader context of anti-revolutionary politics. Sandwiched between Kuyper as the much admired party architect and Colijn, who was much more in the limelight as a heavyweight from the

start, Idenburg played a backstage role on the party platform. Overstating his significance, as Van der Jagt does in my view, has a more ulterior motive, however. The biographer covertly wishes to redeem orthodox Christianity from the blame of racism attached to this brand of Calvinism, which resorted to colonialism as a circuit and vehicle for spreading its fundamentalist gospel. Van der Jagt's emphasis on ethical policies is meant to soft-pedal what is upfront in *Our Program*: the gross inferiority of civilizations and religious creeds other than the Western one. Idenburg proved to be a little less rigorous on this issue than either Kuyper before him or Colijn after him. But after stepping down from his official postings, he also adhered in hindsight to this article of faith which marked the ARP's course from its foundation to the end of colonial rule (Idenburg 1929).

The onset of multinational capitalism and its insistence on colonial domination

Ethical policies were not only weakly sponsored and executed but were also superseded right from the start by a contrasting course of action of which Jacob Theodoor Cremer was the pacesetter. In 1876, in his capacity as director of the Deli Company, which started operating in the early phase of the plantation industry on Sumatra's East Coast, he wrote an address to parliament in which he pleaded for the inclusion of penal sanctions in the coolie ordinance. His petition found political favour and its enactment meant that employment became regulated in legislated bondage. On his return to the Netherlands, he again turned to parliament with an appeal to stop the annual flow of financial surplus into the homeland's treasury (Cremer 1881). His appeal was not driven by a moral urge to alleviate impoverishment but aimed at infrastructural development of the archipelago to open up the resource-rich islands outside Java for capitalist business (Darini 2021). This pioneering captain of industry realized that he would have to join the political caucus in order to boost his strategic design. His petition actually concretized what Kuyper had already suggested in his party manifesto of 1879:

> The archipelago does in fact constitute a single group of islands that belongs together. A common future is the best and most natural destiny for these islands. Given that the Netherlands happens to be sovereign in well over two-thirds of their populated areas, it is only natural that the unification of these scattered islands should take place under our flag. (Kuyper 2015: para. 274)

Once back in the metropole, Cremer became a member of the Liberal Union and was allotted a seat in parliament in 1885 to campaign for the subjection of Aceh in the national interest. His appointment as minister of colonies in a liberal-conservative coalition enabled him from 1897 until 1901 to seek a range of allies to jointly implement his imperialist master plan. Nicknamed 'coolie Cremer' by social-democratic parliamentarians – for his role in the brutal exploitation of the huge workforce contracted for Deli's plantation belt – he saw to it that the lion's share of the budget set aside for ethical policies was spent on major public works inside and outside Java. The main priorities of his blueprint were railway and road building, irrigation and port construction to promote maritime traffic. Regular shipping would connect the outlying regions and involve them in regional and international trade. All these ventures were meant to be first and foremost at the service of private enterprise, the plantation and mining industry in particular. The Indies Mining Law of 1897, drafted by Cremer two years after his installation as minister of colonies, brought minerals under the sole custody of the colonial state. By splitting up natural deposits from property of land, he made sure that the Indonesian population could not claim ownership to these treasures of the soil waiting to be processed as industrial commodities (Van Maanen 2021:28-30).

Cremer found a close associate in Aart van der Wijck who, on his resignation as a high-ranking colonial official, joined the board of the Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij (Royal Packet Navigation Company, KPM). To find adequate scope for the company's interests, he rejoined government service to act as governor-general in the East Indies in 1893. During his stint in high command and in proper imperialist fashion, he did not sever his ties with private business. At Van der Wijck's initiative, an expedition force invaded the island of Lombok and he arranged these troops to be transported by KPM vessels. It was during this operation that Colijn, still a mere lieutenant in the colonial army, committed war crimes which he himself acknowledged and for which he received, approved of and mediated by minister Idenburg, the highest military medal awarded for meritorious and exceptional bravery. In a letter to his wife, Colijn, wrote:

> We could not grant pardon. I ordered nine women and three children, begging for their lives and huddled near me in a heap, to be shot. It was a nasty job but it had to be done. The soldiers bayonetted their bodies with glee. (Langeveld 1998: 59)

In 1899, having completed his stint as governor-general, Van der Wijck resumed his lucrative business career as an oil and shipping magnate.

As resident of Surabaya he happened in 1888 to witness the beginning of oil exploration in East Java (Van Maanen 2021). He saw it as a bonanza which made him change his trade from colonial official to become a leading captain of colonial industry. Van Der Wijck was not shy in using the political acumen he had acquired to become chairman of the newly established Council for Mining in 1902 and member of the Senate in 1904. But he netted the largest part of his high income as CEO of the Royal Dutch Petroleum Company, which was given permission to explore oil wells in Sumatra. In competition with Standard Oil, the Dutch company had successfully lobbied for the concession, which depended on the granting authority of Idenburg. In 1906, this enterprise merged with the Shell Transport and Trading Company sourcing oil in Kalimantan. The fusion of these like-minded industries amalgamated a year later to Royal Shell, which eventually turned to worldwide expansion from its Dutch headquarters.

Next in line for admission to the imperialist clique of politicians and policymakers was Jo van Heutsz. As a senior officer in the colonial army, he had published a pamphlet, *De onderwerping van Atjeh* (The subjugation of Aceh), in 1893 in which he explained why the war declared on this sultanate in North Sumatra a quarter of a century earlier had resulted in heavy losses but not in the conclusive defeat of this ferocious and tenacious enemy. His unsolicited counsel on how to pacify the rebellious province impressed both military and politicians in the colonial high command, A year later, Van Heutsz was appointed civil and military governor of Aceh and mandated to go ahead with his strategy. He arranged for Colijn to join him as his adjutant. It was a role which, many years before, had similarly marked Idenburg's rise in the military hierarchy. Not much later, Van Heutsz was appointed governor-general, a posting to which he also brought Colijn. The ongoing war and its political fallout remained their first priority, and even more so when lower ranking officers opened the book on war crimes that had been committed. Both Idenburg and Kuyper vehemently denied the charges in parliament. Colijn, however, did not hesitate to admit to the reported cruelties:

> In his wording, women are also used to fighting along with men and try to escape together with them. Not every now and then but again and again. It may sound indifferent but it is standing practice in our skirmishes in the Indies. The first blow is half the battle. And when our forces target a village occupied by the enemy, women and children cannot be spared. (Cited in Van de Loo 2017; see also Hagen 2018)

In 1907, on his resignation from the army, Colijn joined the colonial state as advisor on the governance of the provinces outside Java. To substantiate this designation, he journeyed around the length and breadth of the archipelago to take stock of the islands not yet incorporated into the East Indies (Colijn 1907). On his return to the homeland as an already well-known and vocal member of the ARP, he joined its parliamentary fraction, later becoming minister of war in the same rightist coalition of religious and conservative parties in which Idenburg came back for a second term as minister of colonies in 1908. After completing his ministerial tenure, Colijn preferred to turn to civil life and private colonial business. As CEO of Bataafse Petroleum Maatschappij (Batavian Oil Company, BPM, later Royal Dutch Shell), he had landed a very lucrative position which offered him ample opportunity to become a man of fortune. A capitalist-driven political economy had emerged in the Indonesian archipelago, which testified to a close alliance between colonial policies and private business.

In his study discussing the history of KPM, À Campo also emphasized the significant role this shipping line played in colonial state formation (À Campo 1992). The decision to make the enterprise responsible for all maritime transport throughout the archipelago reflected the increased significance of Dutch imperialism, while at the same time granting this monopoly to a Dutch company contributed to achievement of this goal. Just like Cremer, his sparring partners Van der Wijck, Van Heutsz and Colijn were the major figureheads in this geopolitical web. Imperialism was the breeding ground for the exuberant multinationalism its instigators extolled and played a major, much underrated role in the historiography on metropolitan state formation. It was a credo that claimed an imperial identity that transcended the homeland, enfolding territories and their ethnicities acquired in overseas expansion. The governmental fabrication of this empire had a capitalist stamp to which a patriotic flavour was added. Kuyper had commented on this fervour in *Our Program*:

> To possess colonies is an honour. It enhances our prestige, affords us a different place in Europe then we would otherwise have, and causes the splendour of a glorious past to shine over the weaknesses of our current life as a nation. Having colonies is a privilege that others envy. To defend the colonies should be worth something to us. (Kuyper 2015: para. 252)

The front-rank politicians of the ARP had wholeheartedly consented to spread colonial governance to the whole peninsula, but without losing sight of their own ideological objectives. Those considerations regularly cropped

up in the official and private correspondence with which Idenburg and Kuyper kept in regular touch with each other. Dutch power and authority had for a long time been mainly concentrated on Java, Madura, Bali, various parts of Sumatra and Maluku. Many of the large and small islands parcelled out over the peninsula had only become effectively included in the realm of the East Indies from the end of the nineteenth century onwards. Many of these tracts were inhabited by tribes still adhering to paganism. Giving missionaries of Christianity permission to settle in these quarters might result in building up a counterweight against the Muslim majority of the autochthonous population in Java and Sumatra. In confrontational parlance Kuyper had given vent to his intention to raise the Christian cross against the Islamic crescent moon. The rank and file of the military force recruited for the colonial army were mainly recruited in the Maluku islands of Indonesia and were already converted to Christianity at the time of the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (Dutch East India Company, VOC). In the round of negotiations in the late 1940s which preceded Indonesia's independence, the Dutch delegation proposed to split the country and nation up into a decentralized framework which would build-up to a combined union headed by the Queen of the Netherlands. This plan foresaw 'a nation of Mohammedans and Christians in which white and brown would be assembled'. This formula had been concocted by Huib van Mook, the last minister of colonies (1949: 222). His wishful thinking of unity in diversity was of a very different fabric than the similar appeal which Sukarno had flagged for the future of Indonesia.

The outgoing tide of colonialism

Admitting that the colonized people were unwilling to cooperate, Idenburg warned that patience was required to complete the colonial task, because to hand over authority to a revolutionary avant-garde was out of the question. The road to liberty had to be paved prudently and a beginning would be made at the bottom of society. It was an implication intended to disparage popular clamour for freedom and self-rule. Van der Jagt suggests that Idenburg was fully aware of the emerging political restiveness and competently forestalled niches of dissent from building up into orchestrated resistance. It is not only with the wisdom of hindsight that his misapprehension of the changing tide should be exposed. The historian Jan Romein wrote an essay in which he deliberated on the awakening of Asia which had started in the early twentieth century, also in Indonesia 'where the paddy grows

inaudibly' (Romein 1929). Published in the Netherlands but banned from circulation in the Indies, his essay was avidly read and passed on in the underground nationalist circuit. Colonial authorities held on to the illusion that the initiators of the nationalist movement had been unable to mobilize a mass following. This *idée fixe*, incurred by a climate of fierce repression, found application in resorting to the so-called exorbitant rights which allowed the authorities to deal ruthlessly with protest. Those among the front ranks who openly dared to raise the call for freedom, as, for instance, Tan Malaka and Ernest Douwes Dekker did, were extradited; others, such as Mohammed Hatta, Sutan Sjahrir and Sukarno were detained for many years. The main leaders of the abortive communist revolt which broke out in 1926-27 were either sentenced to death or locked up in a gruesome penal camp especially erected for them in faraway New Guinea (Irian Jaya). The impeachment from beginning to end of the nationalist leadership was a major reason why, after independence, democracy failed to become embedded in the political set up and why public authority soon acquired an authoritarian twist. From the Dutch side, the question of how to frame the postcoloniality of the Indies was not considered in any other way than as a political imbroglio. Taking stock of Indonesian perceptions continued to remain an uncharted avenue. The title of Idenburg's biography refers to Pramoedya Ananta Toer's ironical comment on the intrusion of aliens into the Indonesian archipelago as angels from Europe. But in none of the many pages of the book does the author deem it relevant to take account of the narratives in which Indonesia's most famous novelist discusses the nature, impact and downfall of Dutch colonial rule.

The wave of decolonization in the aftermath of World War II led to the disappearance of the former rulers from the overseas statecraft which had been fabricated from the homelands. In the metropolitan historiography dwelling on the colonial past, the fight for freedom is dealt with as a fait accompli. Adamant unwillingness to waive the sustained extraction of raw resources and cheap labour power, which was the pinnacle of the tenacious efforts of the colonizing powers not to abandon the territories they had occupied, has remained covered up in the conventional historical documentation. The Netherlands is not the only nation which did its utmost not to surrender the overseas parts of its empire and to retain the fabric of a multinational state. Martin Thomas has brought together in two volumes essays documenting how France tried to keep its colonial presence in Africa and Southeast Asia intact by resorting to extreme violence (Thomas 2011-12).

As will be highlighted in more detail in the next chapter, this Dutch endeavour became embodied in a well-oiled lobby with Willem Treub as its

founder and pilot. One of the channels to exercise pressure, addressing both the political forum and public opinion, was a periodical published from 1929 to 1940 *De Rijkseenheid, staatkundig-economisch weekblad ter versterking van de banden tussen Nederland en de Indiën* (Imperial unity, a political-economic weekly to reinforce the ties between the Netherlands and the Indies). The editors and contributors, listed in each issue, were well-known members of the high-ranking bourgeoisie (Taselaar 1999). The periodical's circulation aimed to arouse pro-colonial feelings and demonstrated that, besides the ARP, now headed by Colijn, liberal-to-conservative politicians and big business shared and sponsored the propagated belief in a multinational state whose tropical possessions were meant to remain firmly embedded.

Interestingly, this objective was already phrased in a memorandum on how to promote business in Asia drafted by one of the first CEOs of the VOC in the early seventeenth century. After committing genocide on one of the Spice Islands, massacring the population and enslaving survivors who did not manage to escape the ordeal, Jan Pieterszoon Coen stated that the VOC had come to the archipelago with the intention never to leave again. In 1937, Colijn, the ARP boss who was prime minister of the Netherlands five times between 1925 and 1939, commemorated Coen's 350th birthday. He conceded that this trailblazer of Dutch expansion overseas had on occasion been relentless, but he hailed the man as a veritable and righteous son of Calvinism (Colijn 1937).

Conclusion

Situating Idenburg in between Kuyper and Colijn and glorifying him as a committed proponent of ethical colonialism leads to an improper balance of what these three politicians had in common: a fundamentalist religiosity which aimed at virtuous Christianity as the driving force in the attainment of civilization. My rejection of this gospel and its implicit jingoistic racism is threefold. In the first place, the complete denial of the desire for freedom of the colonized population. The obstinate refusal to acknowledge and accommodate the ambition to construct and self-manage the nation's fabric is the cornerstone of colonialism. In the second place, an ethos of anti-revolutionary tyranny which was aggravated by a Eurocentric lens, defined advancement not in an emic but in an etic perspective. The religious bias went hand in hand with both the inability and unwillingness to operationalize and implement ethical policies in the secular spirit in which they were announced. Soft pedalled and underfunded right from the start,

they never reached the take-off stage. Lastly, the missing notion that behind mere lip service to ethical policies a vigorously practiced capitalism unfolded, either passively (Kuyper and Idenburg) or actively (Colijn) endorsed by these stalwarts of anti-revolutionary politics. Colijn was a captain of industry whose greed to grow rich as his first priority concerned both Idenburg and Kuyper, but it was a disapproval they never expressed in public.

Idenburg privately deplored the strong support given to colonial capitalism in parliament by Colijn, the former lieutenant of Van Heutsz and rising star in the ARP. 'We should not forget', Idenburg commented to Kuyper in 1911, 'that the true Anti-Revolutionary is against the exploitation by the mother country, no less by private enterprise than by the state.' All the same, Idenburg did agree with Kuyper that Colijn should be the next ARP leader when Kuyper retired (Kuitenbrouwer and Schijf 1998: 81).

In response to social-democratic criticism against corporate capitalism in what came to be seen as 'our Indies', Kuyper retracted from the blame he had cast upon private enterprise in *Our Program*. He now suggested that investment of capital from the homeland was preconditional for economic growth to take off (Brouwer 1958: 16). Stymied in a total disregard for the exploitation of the colonial workforce, his argumentation implied that the social question, as was being posed and solved by allowing for collective action in the homeland, could be prevented from taking shape in the Indies. My inference from this contrast is that the lobby articulating the drive of capitalism in the Indies which emerged in the late-colonial era succeeding in slowing down the process of concerted assertion by which labour in the homelands was able to engage in emancipatory action to gain both economic and political rights.

Idenburg's biography has been favourably reviewed in the mainstream Dutch media. That positive judgement diverges from the anti-colonial discourse which has come to dominate the contemporary assessment on the rise and decline of Europe's expansion overseas. As can be inferred from the ambit of my essay, this countervailing opinion is a verdict on Europe's colonial past with which I fully concur. In a recent monograph, Caroline Elkins (2022) has strongly denounced the idea that liberal imperialism, of which ethical politics was the Dutch synonym, endeavoured to develop the occupied territories and their population despite the plunder and repression inherent to it. The violence practiced and the impunity to continue the brutal subjection of these countries and nations, which she has documented in elaborate detail for the British empire and as Martin Thomas has put on record for the same French colonial mindset, are entirely applicable to the brutal Dutch and Belgian regimentation of their statecraft overseas.

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11 The Capitalist Imperative of Colonialism

> Do you know what colonial politics are?' No one answered. 'It is a system or power structure to consolidate hegemony over occupied countries and peoples. Someone who agrees with such a system is a colonialist, who not only agrees with it, but also legitimizes it, carries it out and defends it.
> – Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *This Earth of Mankind* (1996: 211)

The colonial surplus drained off

The appropriation of land and labour power in Java, by forcing the peasantry to grow crops for sale on the world market, did not go unnoticed in Europe's imperialist era. The cultivation system had brought huge benefits to the Dutch treasury, amounting to close to half of government revenues by the mid-nineteenth century. Johannes van den Bosch had been given a free hand in plundering Java's land and people from the time he took office as governor-general. From the metropolitan headquarters in The Hague, Minister Jean-Chrétien Baud wrote to him: 'Sooner or later, we will lose the colonies in any case, whether by internal rebellion or foreign attack; one should therefore not expend any further outlay and only get whatever one can gain from it.'

The letter instructing him to do so was sent on 31 July 1830 at the launch of the cultivation system (Westendorp Boerma 1950: 103). I have reported how the early colonial policymakers managed to requisition the workforce needed for raising profits sky-high while making sure that the cost for their insatiable craving would be outsourced by locking up the labour power required for it in a straitjacket of corvée managed by the landowning aristocracy (Breman 2015). But in the same publication I also documented that the increased unwillingness of the peasantry to comply with the heavy levies imposed on them was a major consideration in the tardy abolition of forced cultivation on Java.

This decision, taken in 1870, did not reduce the surplus extracted from the Netherlands' main colonial domain. The shift to free enterprise, with capital for private plantation agriculture provided by the homeland, went hand in hand with the seizure of undeveloped or little cultivated village land. Under the Agrarian Law promulgated in the same year vast tracts of

agricultural land, lying waste or only tilled incidentally, were no longer available to the local population. Half a century later, apart from laying claim to all untapped natural resources in the archipelago, the annexation of hidden wealth generated the labour power required for it. Cornelis van Vollenhoven (1925) would condemn this large-scale expropriation as outright land grabbing. A growing pool of land-poor and landless peasants became available for casual and extremely low-paid employment on plantations and in mining enterprises which were set up during the next decades. The annual return calculated for the money invested in these capitalist ventures exceeded 14 per cent from 1919 to 1928, significantly higher than the world average (Buelens and Frankema 2016). These spectacular profits were predominantly made by companies located in Java and Sumatra. The East Indies contributed 13.7 per cent to the gross product of the Netherlands in 1938 (Derksen and Tinbergen 1945). In addition, of course, there was the income earned by Dutch people in the East Indies, just under 3 per cent at a low estimate. Though less than at the time of the cultivation system, these remittances were a major addition to the stock of economic activity in the homeland. But the concept of colonial surplus extends to much more than the return on capital invested in colonial business activity for the imperial heyday years from 1880 to 1939. Based on more accurate and comprehensive data than any preceding calculations, Alec Gordon has in successive publications scaled up these conservative estimates to a much higher volume (Gordon 2010, 2012, 2014, 2018). His findings, based on balance of payments statements, testify to the enormous surplus – 27 billion guilders – extracted from Indonesia in the late colonial period, generated mainly by large-scale agricultural and mining enterprises. These remittances were of invaluable significance for the accumulation of capital, primarily but not exclusively in the Netherlands. Realizing the importance of this added value to the metropole would give grounds to the later and repeatedly expressed fear that, without tapping this rich source of income, the homeland's economy was doomed to sink to a much lower level.

The link between colonialism and capitalism has been under-reported in Dutch historiography. This observation seems to contradict an article by Maarten Kuitenbrouwer and Huibert Schijf, 'The Dutch Colonial Business Elite at the Turn of the Century' (1998). Plantations, mines, commercial enterprises such as banking concerns, import-export trading houses and overland or maritime transport undertakings had in previous decades brought their expanding operations in the archipelago under limited liability companies. The authors draw their quantitative data from a register of capitalist businesses, which they then supplement by mapping the social,

cultural and political ties that its owning and managing elite maintained. They use the term 'regent capitalism' as a label for their analysis. Agriculture was the largest sector of business activity in the form of plantations for growing commercial crops, followed by mining (ores and oil) with far fewer enterprises, led by the Royal Dutch Petroleum Company. Their research further focused on a sample of 212 corporate associations active in the various branches of the economy, reflected in the following results as shown in Table 11.1.

Table 11.1. Selected companies by economic sector

Economic sector	*Number*	*Percentage*
Banking	10	4.7
Agriculture	98	46.2
Mining	47	22.2
Industry	28	13.7
Trade	4	1.9
Mortgage/Finance	4	1.9
Shipping	3	1.4
Railway	1	0.5
Tramway	4	1.9
Insurance	13	6.1
Total	212	100.0

Source: Kuitenbrouwer and Schijf (1998: 67).

The authors consider at length the intertwining with the colonial machinery that characterized capitalist activity. Their data shows that economic interests played a major role in shaping colonial politics and that there were close links between colonial rule and big business.

> [T]he leading members of the business elite who dominated the national and colonial economy and figured prominently in Dutch politics during the interwar years – in particular the long-serving Calvinist prime minster, H. Colijn, the top colonial banker C.J.K. van Aalst and the oil magnate H. Deterding, who started their careers at the end of the nineteenth century – were *homines novi*. Many of them married into patrician families and increasingly adopted a *regent* lifestyle, including aristocratic country estates, exclusive art collections, and large charity donations. Of the nine Colonial Secretaries between 1888 and 1914, five held one or more positions in colonial companies before or after their terms of office. The same applies to two of the five governors-general of the Netherlands Indies

> during this period. Of the total number of 77 members of the Second Chamber who represented the big cities (note: Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague) for one or more terms between 1888 and 1914, almost one-third (22) held positions in colonial companies in this period. (Kuitenbrouwer and Schijf 1998: 72-73)

Various details clearly demonstrate this alliance between politics and capital in both colony and metropole. For example, the almost casual mention that civil service officials carried more weight than capitalist business only in backward districts. Or how correspondence between the minister of colonies and the Governor-General in collusion with the management of the Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij (Netherlands Trading Society, NHM) prevented the American Standard Oil Company from gaining a foothold in the profitable Dutch colony. The façade of a moral vocation to level up the colonized population proves to have blatantly concealed big business interests. The military pacification of Aceh was a matter of life and death and also came about under that pressure, according to Kuitenbrouwer and Schijf. In the Dutch parliament, Van Kol had condemned this show of military might as an expression of an imperialist policy driven by capitalism. Minister Idenburg squarely rejected the accusation and stated: 'Use of the power of the sword by the government can be the highest requirement of human love' (Netherlands House of Representatives 1901: 139). The incorporation of Aceh and other outer islands in the East Indies was considered a must in order to prevent intrusion by foreign powers. Governor-General W. Rooseboom requested Minister Idenburg in 1903 to source finance for spending on the expanded territorial scope of colonial rule. These are salient details which demonstrate that colonial rule was in the service of capitalist big business. Yet the two authors go no further in their argument than to conclude towards the end that:

> The ethical colonial policy enjoyed a somewhat uneasy relationship with colonial capitalism. Idenburg privately deplored the strong support given to colonial capitalism given in Parliament by Colijn, the former lieutenant of Van Heutsz and rising star in the Anti-Revolutionary Party. 'We should not forget', Idenburg commented to Kuyper in 1911, 'that the true Anti-Revolutionary is against the exploitation by the mother country, no less by private enterprise than by the state.' All the same, Idenburg did agree with Kuyper that Colijn should be the next Anti-Revolutionary Party leader, when Kuyper would retire. (Kuitenbrouwer and Schijf 1998: 81)

In their calculation of the amount of capital, its sectoral distribution and concentration of its management in a small but powerful coterie of stakeholders, Kuitenbrouwer and Schijf did not investigate how this wealth was generated. For the most part, accumulation of riches took place in the colony itself, maximizing profits by reducing production costs, of which labour constituted the lion's share. What they do not mention is that the high returns underlying the rapid aggregation of capital in the late colonial era had their origins in a policy of boundless extortion of the natural resources and exploitation of the labour power required for it. I see their meaningful analysis as affirming rather than contradicting my earlier statement about underexposure of the link between colonialism and capitalism.

Failure to industrialize

The dominant role in the late-colonial economy of plantation and mining industry overshadowed that of all other sectors. The subordinate importance of the peasant economy in rural areas was accentuated by the limited scale of off-farm employment. As a side activity the income generated from it and time spent on waged work accounted for only a small percentage of the household budget. By the early twentieth century, research into what was euphemistically called 'diminishing welfare' had revealed the marginal significance of indigenous industries. To the extent that there were any, these small-scale artisanal workshops depended on craft and home-based skills. Non-agricultural activity in the village economy had played a much more important role early in the nineteenth century. This sectoral diversity that existed had faded away under the pressure of the heavy burdens in kind or cash on land and labour imposed on the peasantry. The communal character that Eric Wolf attributed to the peasant economy was the outcome of a colonial policy of ossification that promoted agrarianization and sought to discourage sources of livelihood other than agriculture (Wolf 1967). Conrad Theodor van Deventer, one of the instigators of the 'debt of honour' appeal, affirmed that the Javanese, in terms of not only trade and shipping but also industry, ranked much higher in the past than around 1900. The Declining Welfare Study (Onderzoek Mindere Welvaart), carried out among the Javanese population in the early twentieth century, revealed the low importance of occupational diversity. Even cheap and easy-to-produce consumer goods such as clothes and pottery, for example, came from abroad and had to be bought with money. According to the standard colonial wisdom, the Indonesian peasant was a cultivator and lacked aptitude for

industrial work (*Overzicht Inlandsche Handel en Nijverheid*, 1909: 177, quoted in Onderzoek Mindere Welvaart 1909).

In 1915 a 'Committee for the Development of Factory Industry in the Dutch East Indies' was set up. The name made clear that its installation did not aim at the promotion of craft-based production. Large-scale industrial activity financed with capital from the metropole had to redress what until then had been neglected. The lack of sectoral diversification in the economy was reflected at the outbreak of World War I in the stagnating import of industrial commodities, and the rise in their prices when they did reach the colony. The priority now was not to alleviate impoverishment, but securing a greater interest. Namely, to prevent the geopolitical position of Dutch colonial possessions from being weakened by other imperial powers (Van Oorschot 1956: 27-38). To avert this danger in the existing situation of free trade, greater diversity of the colonial economy was considered to be urgently needed. From the outset, expectations about the accomplishment of this goal were not high. The commission was attributed a paper existence, an assessment that was to prove more than accurate. Its members remained silent for the first two years, met infrequently, disagreed thoroughly when they did, and when the commission was disbanded in 1926, its members went their separate ways without reporting on their lack of unanimity.

What was the cause of this fiasco? Alec Gordon (2009) answers that question in his investigation of the commission's mission and the differences of opinion how to fulfil it. Of subordinate importance were the barriers created by, firstly, low sales of manufactured goods due to the limited purchasing power of the population; secondly, a lack of infrastructure for transporting the goods produced; thirdly, the refusal to grant protectionism to support the new industries. Even more decisive than these obstacles combined was the opposition from the dominant interest in the colonial economy: the plantation lobby. The rise of factory labour could not help but weaken the grip of large-scale agriculture on the rural proletariat, directly, through the provision of alternative employment and indirectly, through the inevitably higher pay. This would adversely affect the extremely low price of labour. The sizeable textile industry in the metropole marketed a significant part of its output on Java as early as the final decades of the nineteenth century. But the textile magnates in the homeland responded with little or no interest to invitations made on behalf of the Factory Commission to develop their activities in the East Indies. Attempts to find alternative sources of capital for establishing large-scale industry were also unsuccessful. Besides the lack of skilled labour, the reason for this conspicuous absence of interest shown by the Dutch captains of industry most likely has been the certainty

to keep this market cornered even without shifting part of the production capacity from the metropole to the East Indies.

The colonial congress of the Social Democratic Labour Party (Sociaal-Democratische Arbeiderspartij, SDAP) in 1930 took to heart the observation that breaking the colonial link by giving in to the Indonesian desire for freedom risked condemning 150,000 workers, or 10 per cent of the working population in the Netherlands, to unemployment. The large-scale agricultural syndicates strongly opposed any policy that detracted from their corporate interests in the maintenance of the cheap labour policy. Its advocates both inside and outside the bureaucracy insisted that there was still plenty of room for agricultural expansion outside Java. They claimed, moreover, that this primary sector provided sufficient employment opportunities, making an industrialization policy unnecessary. Any deviation from this proposed course was met with vehement, orchestrated and successful opposition. The head of the Department of Economic Affairs expressed in 1937 his opinion that a sweeping transformation of the colonial economy was at odds with what the East Indies had always been and should remain: an agricultural economy (Gordon 2009: 25). To be sure, pressure on land as the main source of livelihood was inordinately high on Java, but transmigration was the obvious solution to this problem. After all, the island's surplus population could relocate to the still undeveloped outer regions and bring these underpopulated areas under cultivation, as had happened in Java. This solution, however, failed to address how these still unexploited areas would be opened up, with the immigrants as peasant owners of the land allotted to them and/or as workers on the new plantations and mines.

A frontal reappraisal of colonial custody

In the mid-nineteenth century Baud, the most influential politician of Dutch statecraft overseas, had warned that colonialism would not last. That moment could be postponed with prudent policies but was, in his view, ultimately inevitable. In this chapter, I explain how Baud's awareness of the finite nature of the colonial relationship gave way to the view that the conquered territories were too profitable to give up. His predecessor Johannes van den Bosch had already articulated this geopolitical idea and put it forward as part of his mercantilist policy.

> Together, the Netherlands and the overseas territories had to be seen as a power of the highest rank. They were closely intertwined and had

> to complement and support each other, which was only possible under energetic leadership. The laissez-faire principle fell short here, especially since in modern times all countries were striving for self-sufficiency. In addition, the government should not limit itself to concern for affluence, for 'we must not forget that we are surrounded by hungry and powerful neighbours, by no means averse to appropriating colonies which can further their interests'. (Quoted in Westendorp Boerma 1950: 128-29)

In the aftermath of the freedom gained by colonized peoples around the middle of the twentieth century, the earlier eagerness of the homelands to continue their occupation of overseas territories and its peoples has received far less attention in postcolonial historiography than it deserved.

The pledge of ethical policies that envisaged the inevitable emancipation of the subjected population was immediately met with vigorous opposition from the white caste of expatriates in the East Indies. This strong objection not only persisted over the years but also became endorsed in colonial politics, as was highlighted in the preceding chapter. In order to realize this illusionary outcome, the population of the metropole would also have to develop a close attachment and affinity to the colonial domains. The permanent possession of 'our Indies' took shape in the idea of a tropical Netherlands of which the archipelago in Southeast Asia was of emblematic importance. Unlike the West Indies, of course, which were considered a loss-making annoyance and a burden for further governance. The bourgeoisie in the Netherlands has from the very beginning been strongly involved in the colonial enterprise, provided the manpower for it and shared in its profits. In order to ward off the prospect of doom, C.G.S. Sandberg, the messenger of the warning 'Indië verloren, rampspoed geboren' ('The Indies lost, disaster born'), the title of his pamphlet from 1914, focused on the working classes. They lacked in his view the awareness that their jobs and income, their rising standard of living, demanded that the profitable colony be preserved.

> I say, especially the petty shopkeeper and the workman, since these, being the least wealthy, are the first and most certain to be threatened with ruin by a possible loss of the Indies.... If we want to preserve the Indies, we must force ourselves to see beyond the immediate future of our own people, for several generations to come. (Sandberg 1914: 20)

Sandberg's prediction of doom has been dismissed in the aftermath as utterly unjustified (Wesseling 1988: 286). However, his appeal immediately echoed when it was raised by him and would again be invoked in the struggle around

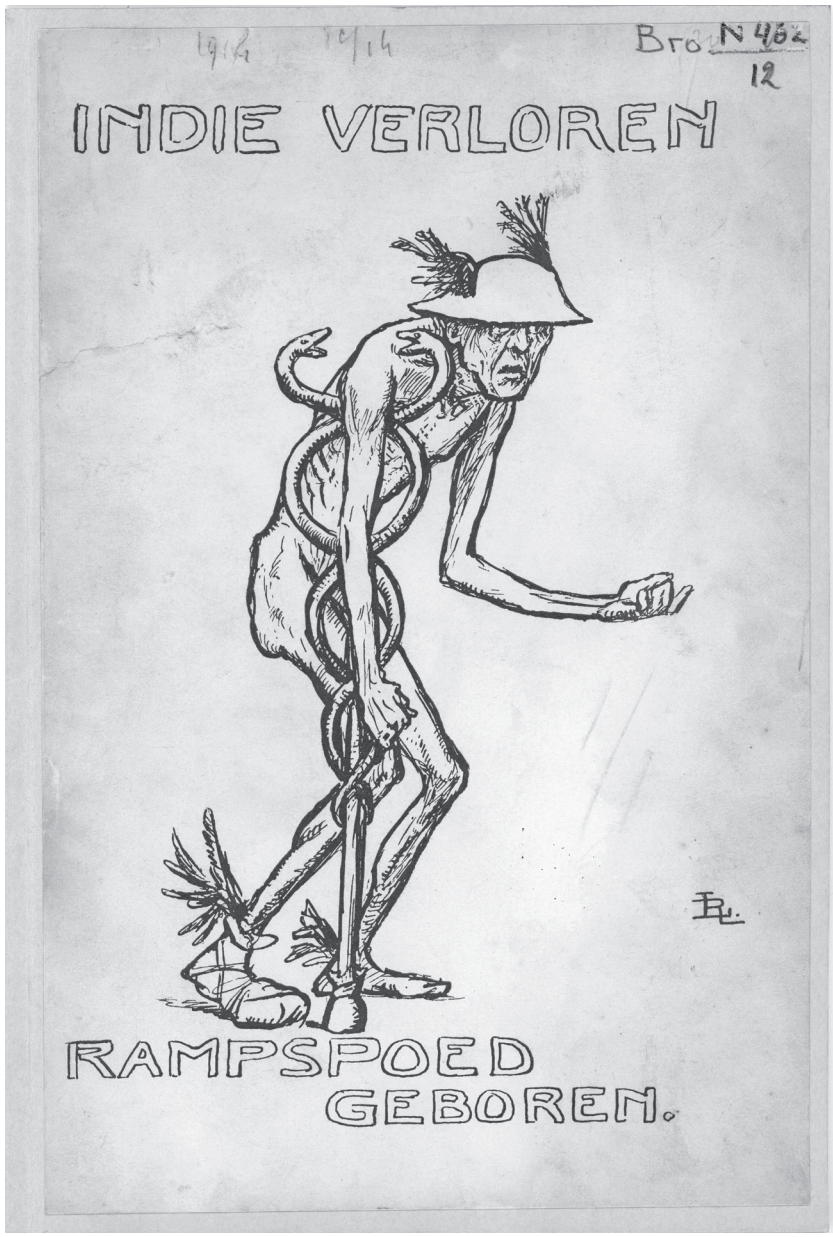

Figure 11.1. Front cover of the 1914 pamphlet *Indië verloren, rampspoed geboren* (The Indies lost, disaster born) by C.G.S. Sandberg.

decolonization. It is however not only for this reason that I draw attention to his warning. The author also called on the Netherlands to remain faithful to its Christian identity by vigorously spreading within its own national

borders the true gospel and firmly turn against Islam, which had come to occupy far too large a place in the East Indies. His exhortation bears witness to the Christian fundamentalism that was an important breeding ground for the colonial ideology of the Netherlands as I have highlighted in Chapter 10. I take Sandberg's plea as confirmation of Tocqueville's thesis that colonial expansion was meant to transcend class barriers and intended to bring about national unity on the home front. This politically inspired ideal, dealt with in Chapter 2, seems to have achieved the intended effect to at least some extent.

The crusade for imperial enterprise

My sketch of the attempt to insert the East Indies permanently into the construction of a Greater Netherlands focuses on the figure of Willem Treub (1858-1931). He became the ringleader of an organized lobby with its main platform in the caucus of metropolitan capitalism. The intention to pursue an ethical course in the late-colonial decades had been reacted to with much apprehension in this powerful circuit. It was an opinionated view that adjustments in the political economy in favour of the Indonesian people, however marginally achieved, unnecessarily and prematurely yielded to a desire that needed to be adamantly refuted. Treub met that urgent ambition as the designer and founding father of the Ondernemingsraad voor Nederlands-Indië (Council for Enterprise in the Netherlands Indies). His close acquaintance and links with big business enabled him to bring together its main stakeholders and acquire the ample budget needed to exert political and public pressure. His initial profile as a left-liberal politician dissipated, replaced by an increasingly conservative and fervently anti-socialist stance.

Treub's assessment of what had gone wrong and needed to be put right is derived from his *Nederland in de Oost* (The Netherlands in the Orient) (1923), an account of a trip he made to and through the East Indies shortly after taking office as a lobbyist for colonial business. The text between the beginning and end of his mundane or even banal travelogue contains the political message he wishes to deliver. He begins with an account of the social stratification in the colony. The European upper caste is taken for granted and is not discussed. More attention is given to the non-white contingents with their differences in skin colour. The Indo-Europeans at the top of these intermediate communities are close to the Dutch language and culture. This is not the case for the Indo-Europeans in the lower ranks living in the shadow of the Indonesian population. Among this darker-skinned

category of mixed-blooded people, the good qualities of both races are lacking and the less favourable ones predominate. They are looked down upon, but it is precisely these half- or quarter-developed class of people who suffer from self-overestimation. The feeling of being ill-treated can undermine order and peace in a time of reform. Awareness of this danger should prevent this in-between cohort of subaltern subjects from becoming alienated from colonial authority. This kind of argument continues by identifying problems affecting the Indonesian masses. The insistence of the Ethical Policy on popular education has been accommodated too extensively. The pace of spreading literacy and particularly in proficiency of the Dutch language and culture must be slowed down so as not to arouse feelings of dissatisfaction at the unfulfilled aspirations. This eventuality is associated with intrusion of the socialist movement in the colony which not only receives pernicious support from the radical left in the homeland, but also enjoys undue favouritism among the higher ranks of the colonial bureaucracy. The implicit suggestion is that the despised Ethical Policy is still practiced. Treub strongly urges the government to be aware of this immanent threat to the maintenance of the established rule and order.

This advocate of capitalist business interests in the colonial headquarters chooses his formulations with care, avoids offensive statements and expresses only in veiled language what should be, but may be or cannot be attained. Fortunately, he writes, the Netherlands does not suffer from the delusion that the white races are destined to dominate and the brown or black races to be dominated. Moreover, those who vent their denial of racial equality are unfit to pursue a career as colonial administrators. However, that does not mean that the Javanese people are equal to the Dutch who make efforts to develop them and coach them along the long road to progress. There can therefore be no question of self-governance in the near future. That could not but result in a regrettable fall of living standards for the majority of the population. It would again leave the masses at the mercy of extortion by a landowning aristocracy. Treub fails to mention that these headmen of the peasantry were pressed into that mediation, first by the VOC and then by the early colonial state. His denunciation is continued by turning to domestic politics, with the observation that Van Limburg Stirum, Governor-General from 1916 to 1921, wanted and partly implemented constitutional reforms almost overnight. Those hasty measures were sparked off at the end of World War I in anticipation of political turmoil in the Netherlands as well as in Europe at large; they must be reversed to avert signs of restiveness also emerging in the colonies. The Dutch parliament should become aware of its responsibilities in the handling of this looming

crisis. The decision to establish the People's Council in 1918 had been a step in the wrong direction. It created the misplaced impression that the Indies would be able to manage its own affairs in the foreseeable future. Taking the levelling up of the Indonesian people seriously could not but go hand in hand with the recognition that Dutch supremacy had to be maintained. To reduce material and cultural inequality between the different nationalities, Treub added sternly, can only be apprised when the rallying cry for equality of all and sundry was indeed round the corner. However, this auspicious moment was still very far away, since it would imply that the Netherlands would have properly and successfully achieved its benevolent mission in the East Indies.

Treub does not fail to fulminate against of the official intention to promote industrialization. He claims that this objective, although quite popular among well-meaning Westerners, finds little resonance among the population itself. Without entering into a debate with its advocates in the Factory Commission, Treub criticizes the distrust of big business that, in his opinion, prevailed within the higher ranks [of the colonial bureaucracy. He devotes separate attention in his writings to industrial relations in large-scale capitalist business The management and supervision of the workforce is in European hands and rightly so. How could it be otherwise? These enterprises have increased production and productivity in the country, generating profits that, according to him, has led to a hike of living standards and prosperity in both the Netherlands and the East Indies. Moreover, this activity provides decent livelihood for a very substantial part of the Indonesian population. The controversial penal sanction in the employment contracts, still in force in the plantation belt on Sumatra's East Coast, was introduced in 1880 to impress upon the huge workforce the rights and duties it had acquired. These disciplinary clauses would have to be preserved, Treub felt, also to offer protection and security to the coolies. He was delighted that the body of colonial officials in the outer provinces explicitly endorsed this view, and the same applied to the labour inspectorate where it had been set up.

After these words of praise his tone becomes more critical. The emergence of a mismatch between the size of the senior staff of expatriates in the civil service and the European contingent in private business means that East Indies have degenerated into a bureaucratic state. This excessive appetite for a huge government apparatus is fortunately being acknowledged, offering hope for a more equal balance in the near future. A turn for the better is much needed, as there is no lack of interest abroad in taking over our colonial trove of wealth. The joint interest of the Greater Netherlands calls for extracting the natural resources of the East Indies as a common goal. Including the

inhabitants of the homeland, the Kingdom of the Netherlands totals 60 million people. Building this multinational empire requires that we 'may not let fanciful, ethical, well-meaning humanists among our compatriots distract us from our task in the Orient' (Treub 1923: 128). This task must not, of course, be achieved at the expense of the East Indies. The country and its people ought to share in the expected benefits in of the surplus value generated by exploiting its natural riches, together with the Western energy, knowledge and resources required to do that. Western business plays a pivotal role in this leap forward by bringing together the capital and entrepreneurship to carry out this auspicious task.

The account of the sites Treub visited in Indonesia, written in polished language, was meant to familiarize a wide audience in the Netherlands with 'our Indies', but primarily addressed Dutch politicians. Treub's senior record in the political arena of the metropole made him ideally suited to the venture to which he devoted the final ten years of his life: to make the case for the promotion of capitalist business and to outline a beckoning perspective for the future of this colonial custody. It would have taken him little effort to persuade the various large agro-industrial syndicates, mining companies, trading houses, banking concerns and shipping lines to join together in lobbying, with him as the lynchpin. By the time he took office, the Ethical Policy had already been discredited and abandoned, but its lingering impact detracted from the free hand that had benefited the capitalist stakeholders in the colonial economy so richly. 'Civilization' was no longer the word to describe the promised progress. Treub uses the term 'development', indicative of the matter-of-factness of the approach, how the yawning gap between the imposed backwardness and the apostolate of advancement could be closed. Capitalist enterprise will be both the mainstay and driving force in moving along this pathway to the future. He therefore resolutely rejected the idea – as claimed by the Dutch Labour Party – of any similarity between the social struggle waged by the working class in the Netherlands and the insurgent movement, calling on the Indonesian people to resist exploitation and enslavement. The course of capitalist development implied consolidation of the region within a multinational framework.

> There, in the Far East, lies a part of ourselves that is most closely related to our history and interwoven with our entire national existence. For the foreseeable future, the Indies cannot do without information and help from the West; this information and help are indispensable conditions for the achievement of its ambitions towards development and higher civilization. History and tradition have imposed on the Netherlands the

> task of giving the country both the one and the other.... United, they support and underpin each other again and again and form the Greater Netherlands, our common home, for which every one of us, when it comes down to it, is willing to give their all. (Treub 1923: 413)

Treub was the pivotal figurehead of an argumentation that, in conflict with decolonization, would grow ever louder. Charting that course also required another type of colonial official than so far had been trained for appointment in the ranks of the civil service overseas. Treub was again the initiator who designed a new profile for staffing the governmental machinery overseas.

Another faculty of indology

The executive committee of the colonial Council of Enterprises was convinced that the academic course at the Faculty of Indology of Leiden University for students who wanted to be posted in the colonial civil service had a 'half-socialist, half-communist' slant (Taselaar 1998: 316). Treub contacted the board of trustees of the University of Utrecht to establish a second course in Indology, alongside the one at Leiden. The Indology Fund he set up required member companies of the council he chaired to contribute to its costs. He held the fabric of colonial governance responsible for the mood of insurgence called for by the nascent nationalist movement in the Indies. In his opinion, it was the harmful effect of the Ethical Policy that had caused this growing unrest. The Leiden professors protested against the plans, but in vain. In response to their objection that big business would finance the new faculty, Treub replied that the national interest was at stake. Hendrikus Colijn supported him in trying to break the Leiden monopoly on access to the colonial administration. As a former director of the Bataafse Petroleum Maatschappij (Batavian Oil Company, BPM, later Royal Dutch Shell) and an anti-revolutionary stalwart, Colijn was the right man to help in obtaining the necessary donations and approval in the political arena. However, this was not the only connection that brought the subsidiary of the Royal Dutch Shell group into the picture as a sponsor par excellence.

Carel Gerretson, executive secretary at BPM since 1917, became involved in building up the new faculty of indology at Utrecht at an early stage. He was given the task of designing the study programme for the proposed academic training in a pro-colonial spirit and recruited professors to teach the course on a part-time basis. The curriculum aimed to prepare students for civil service careers, in which they would take for granted the

undisturbed continuation of colonial rule. One of their teachers was Jacob Kohlbrugge, who has been discussed earlier in this book (in Chapter 3) as a professional prober of the Javanese soul. After his return to the Netherlands in 1906, he wrote several treatises decrying Westernization as inappropriate for the Indonesian population. In 1913, the University of Utrecht appointed him professor of ethnology. He eagerly accepted the invitation to train officials for the civil service. In his first series of lectures, he blamed the Ethical Policy as the cause of the growing unrest among the population that had erupted in a failed revolt at the end of 1926 (Kohlbrugge 1927). The official opening in 1925 of the 'Oil Faculty' – a nickname which hinted at the Royal Shell corporation as its main sponsor – was marked by Gerretson's inaugural address, in which he argued that the tribal ethnicities dispersed throughout the archipelago had never succeeded in uniting in statehood. That meant that historically the Dutch East Indies was nothing but part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Asia (Gerretson 1925: 11). Present at the installation of this key figure in the Utrecht faculty of indology were Colijn, now as Prime Minister of the Netherlands, and Treub, representing the colonial Council of Enterprise. The remainder of the invitees included prominent Christian Democratic and Liberal-Conservative politicians, distinguished colonial officials and leading figures from capitalist business in the Indies.

In a confidential note addressed to Treub in 1923, Gerretson had taken stock of what lay ahead with regard to the colonial question in the years to come. More precarious than the rise of the nationalist movement, in his view, was the inclination to capitulate on the Dutch side. He attributed the frightening readiness to squander the colonial project to the disastrous impact of Leiden's academicians going along with the call for Indonesia's independence. Their readiness to acquiesce with the end of Dutch custody and hand over power already had, according to him, a negative impact on colonial governance. For appointment of a new batch of professors at the faculty of indology in Utrecht, the choice had to be based on qualities other than merely scholarly excellence in their field of expertise. Their eligibility depended on having opted for a career in civil life and preferably in the managerial ranks and boards of big businesses or banking corporations. The candidates for these prestigious academic pursuits were screened for their willingness to coach the Indonesians to a better existence. Their ambition to do so should, however, not go too far but remain within reasonable bounds. Finally, the substantial budget required for running the course came out of donations to the Indology Fund, collected again from the members of the colonial Council of Enterprises. These contributions were made anonymously

for fear that the leaking of their generous gifts might trigger public criticism. The list of donors nevertheless became available and contained all the expected names of big business (Van den Muyzenberg and Feddema 1977: 477).

Leiden had reacted with shock to the recognition of a rival faculty. It made Utrecht graduates equivalent to Leiden candidates and thus suitable to be sent out as colonial officials. This signified not only the loss of its monopoly position, but also that Leiden had lost its hegemonic grip on colonial politics. The allegation that the education and scholarly output bred a geist of rebellion against Dutch authority was seen as incongruous and damaging to Leiden's academic reputation. One of its leading chair holders, Van Vollenhoven, rejected in a spirited defence the suggestion that the Leiden body of scholars was inspired by eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinking. He conceded and lamented that Indonesian students in Leiden had anti-Dutch views. However, their aversion to colonial rule did not stem from the education they received at Leiden, but from socialist quarters; it was an ideology by no means shared by the Leiden indologists. Treub replied with annoyance and held his ground in his pamphlet *Onafhankelijk Indologisch hooger onderwijs* (Independent Indological higher education) (1925).

The accusation of political radicalism was aimed at the Indonesian student association. Founded in Leiden in 1908 as the Indische Vereeniging (Indies Association) to strengthen mutual ties of Indonesian students in the diaspora, its character as a social club increasingly gave way to anti-colonial and anti-capitalist activism (Stutje 2016). Renamed Perhimpoenan Indonesia (PI) in 1925, the association's critical stance resonated with kindred spirits in the SDAP, who saw a parallel between the struggle for working-class emancipation in the Netherlands and the independence aspirations of the nationalist movement in the colony. Their escape from the colonial straitjacket and the support these students found on the left of the political spectrum after arrival in the Netherlands were reflected in the new name of the magazine *Indonesia Merdeka* (Free Indonesia). The issue published to mark the association's fifteenth anniversary expressed the drive for freedom in no uncertain terms. The mainstream Dutch press reacted with shock, pointing to Leiden indology as the source of the rebellious tone. The accusation was misplaced; progressive radicalism by no means reflected the political colour of the professorial corps. The education taught in the course gave the highest priority to the sustainability of colonial authority. The Leiden University board was extremely unhappy about the militancy of its Indonesian students. The faculty counsellor, an official still in colonial service nominated to coach the Indonesian students, tried in vain to call

the scapegoats to order. When, in the aftermath of the failed 1926-27 revolt, the PI was found to be in contact with communist leaders exiled from the colony, the counsellor – who was responsible for overseeing the political leanings of Indonesian students in the Netherlands – urged the Ministries of Colonies and Justice to prosecute its leaders on charges of sedition against lawful authority. Among the four detained in 1927 was Mohammed Hatta, later Vice-President of Indonesia (Poeze 1989).

Willem Otterspeer, the University of Leiden's in-house historian, has examined the faculty's feud with Utrecht. Calling the alleged undermining of colonial rule from within the professorial corps absurd, he concluded that the insinuation lacked any factual grounding and backed up his statements with extensive evidence to the contrary:

> As a matter of fact, the Leiden professors were ardent nationalists, devoted to the idea of a greater Netherlands, a Dutch commonwealth to function as an example to the world. Snouck Hurgronje had written about 'the beautiful political and national idea, the genesis of a Dutch state, made up of two geographically separate, but spiritually intimately connected parts, the one in North-West Europe, the other in South-East Asia'. In justification of his ideas Krom spoke about 'the reinforcement of the notion of a Greater Netherlands'. And Colenbrander described ethical policy 'as a tendency towards a higher, a greater, a more promising and more fulfilling Netherlands for all participants'. And he added, 'Certainly, imperialism'. But it was imperialism of a special kind. 'We cannot trust the notion of imperialism to those who soil it with their dirty hands. We have to scour it white, so that all members of the Greater Netherlands community can praise it as their shield glistening in the sun.' (Otterspeer 1989: 213-14)

No, these scholars had certainly not hampered ongoing imperialist domination in any way. On the contrary, had C. Snouck Hurgronje and A.W. Nieuwenhuis not advocated expansion of the colonial domain in the outer regions of the archipelago by annexing Aceh and Borneo? There was no racial bias underlying their imperialist vision, though Nieuwenhuis seemed to come close to it. This Leiden professor had been a strong advocate of the Ethical Policy. In his oration, he saw that mission as imparting civilization to a primitive people. This brand of indologists in the metropole were perceived as supporters of liberal imperialism. Otterspeer is almost as harsh; in a measured assessment, he describes the essence of Leiden's indological agenda:

> It is as if they wanted to have their cake and eat it, to preserve the peoples 'trusted to their guardianship' in their pristine individuality and simultaneously endow them with the benefits of Western civilisation; both to raise them to the independent government of their intellect and resources but to keep them within the bounds of a greater Netherlands. (Otterspeer 1989: 211)

His portrait nevertheless wants to do justice to the eminent merits of the beleaguered professors by praising their in-depth knowledge of the Dutch East Indies, as well as their racial open-mindedness and ability to place their scholarship emphasizing an alternate form of colonialism. In their eyes, the Indonesian was not inferior but different. This view fitted in with the Orientalist scholarship that had taken hold early on in Leiden and continued to be practiced in this colonial school of thought. In his defence against the attack, Van Vollenhoven had argued that levelling up of the Indonesian population was in no way intended to imitate Dutch society. On the contrary, respect for the cultural uniqueness of Indonesian society was paramount: 'Doing full justice to Eastern customs, Eastern culture and Eastern needs', that was what it was all about (Van Vollenhoven 1925: 263). There was no question of a loss of confidence in the colonial mission, an atmosphere of inner abdication. This reputed scholar of law envisaged a fusion of Western and Eastern legal regulations that would culminate in an associative synthesis in the joint fabric that would be unique to Indonesian society. 'The two cultural identities, the Eastern emerging from below and the Western given from above, must grow towards each other' (Van Vollenhoven 1919: 174). That is how he would have wanted it, but that is not how it happened. Even the notion of association, which by no means reflected progressiveness, became anathema in the hardened course of late colonial authority.

The dividing lines between the two universities had by no means met with the approval of the Orientalist scholars in Leiden. The Leiden view of the future of the East Indies was quite different from that of Utrecht, but they had no choice but to resign themselves to the political diktat that had turned out to their disadvantage. That also applied to the enduring social structuring of the colony on the basis of institutional racism between an overwhelming majority of a differentiated mixture of coloured people subordinated to a small minority of white expatriates. Though they turned their backs on the harmful impact of Western business standards and practices, the Leiden professors nevertheless spoke out in their scholarly research in favour of the segregated caste mould in which the Indonesian

population remained locked. I add two telling examples to clarify this conclusion. Van Vollenhoven continued his codification of the indigenous legal mores, recording in ethnically specified registers folk customs that were practised in the diversified parts of the archipelago. Under the collective heading of *adat*, this inventory was formalized in separate laws and regulations for the Indonesian population. A charitable explanation for the call to respect common law was that it prevented the native population from being harmed by Western interference (Otto and Pompe 1989: 246-47). But this well-meaning protection does not detract from the fact that customary law fitted seamlessly into the legislated policy of racial apartheid. In my view, the registration of local mores and customs stemmed from the early colonial state's desire to declare the Javanese village system a self-regulating peasant community. Presented as a sanctified tradition of ancient heritage, my contrary explanation saw it as colonial construction of customary law frozen in time and therefore of dubious validity. What Baud had dubbed the palladium of political peace in Java was in fact the outcome of foreign rule. The peasant corporation was granted local autonomy by the colonial authority as a means of legitimizing cheap governance (Breman 1979).

The second example symptomatic of the toleration or even promotion of racial segregation relates to my appreciation of Julius Boeke's scholarly work. His appointment was intended to fill a gap observed in the curriculum and research at Leiden. The Orientalist profile concentrated on the study of language, culture and law, while neglecting economics. In 1929, a new chair in tropical-colonial economics was established. The name, no doubt chosen in consultation with its occupier, gave Boeke the opportunity to broaden his theory on the character of the peasantry, formulated on the basis of a short tour he had made in British India, in the wider context of the agrarian economies in Asia. It meant that Boeke had no problem in joining the Leiden School of Orientalism. For him, segregation took shape in the distinction between Eastern versus Western economics. It was a watershed split which he discussed in his 1930 oration at Leiden: not a transient but a permanent caesura along racially drawn dividing lines, which he enshrined in the theory of economic dualism (Boeke 1930; Boeke 1953).

The colonial state between colony and independence

At a symposium in 1976, Jan van Baal pointed out that the extensive multi-level governance entrusted to colonial authority and the machinery required for it implied that such a mandate of long duration necessarily took the form

of a state. This also applied to the rule exercised in the Dutch East Indies: 'All the features of the modern state are present here, albeit sparsely, in the form of welfare services, extension of governance throughout the territory, and the beginnings of democracy in the form of a people's council with limited powers' (Van Baal 1976: 101).

It was precisely the delegation of ever more and more complex tasks that finally made decolonization inevitable. The Indonesian population was subordinated to the colonial state, but as subjects without any say. Incorporation within the state strengthened the sense of a common identity that transcended regional diversity and separateness. This realization evoked the aspiration of national unification. Indonesian nationalism grew from within, according to Van Baal. It was not the Ethical Policy as such, as Treub et al. believed, but the foundation of the colonial state that inevitably led to the national state. It was a trajectory, the former Governor of New Guinea (Irian Jaya) concluded, which exemplified the dialectical course of decolonization. While I understand his reasoning, I would still like to point out the possibility of a different outcome: a decolonization which, while consolidated in a new étatist order, retained the social hierarchy that characterized the colonial state. This too is abdication, but in the form of splitting off from the home country, with or without an updated continuation of the previous multinational regime by its new rulers – as happened in North America (the United States and Canada), South Africa, Australia and New Zealand, all of which had a firmly established white population of settlers. Were steps also taken in this direction in the Indies? The top tier from Europe was quite substantial. Although a small minority, it was a contingent where all power and authority rested. In 1930, out of a total population of 60 million, this white caste, mainly Dutch in origin, numbered 208,000, much larger than the contingents of their racial counterparts in Belgium's Congo, British India and French Indochina. Did these Europeans in the Netherlands Indies ever show any tendency to cut ties with their homeland?

The prolonged existence of the colonial state falls into two variants. The first follows the line of thought taken by the advocates of association, with which the Leiden Indology professors were also in agreement. This view of the Ethical Policy, as it was intended, aimed at achieving a social synthesis in which the identities of East and West would merge and the different social classes and nations, in mutual accommodation, would determine their own future in an independent Indies. The new state would retain the rich benefits of economic growth that could no longer be claimed by the former metropole. The advantages proclaimed by the white caste would

be kept intact, but conditioned in a policy of guardianship that offered some scope for improvement in the meagre livelihood at the broad base of society. Moreover, this matrix would allow the possibility of upward mobility and be reflected in an expanding segmentation of intermediate classes between top and bottom. Acquiring independent citizenship will have particularly appealed to the multi-coloured communities in this differentiated in-between layer. Under Governor-General De Jonge's harsh austerity policy on government spending – which he himself looked back on with pride (Van der Wal 1968: 363) – the Indo-European community had come under increasing pressure. Always loyal to colonial authority, voices were now rising in their midst advocating detachment from the homeland. This aspiration was expressed in the Indië voor Indiërs (The Indies for All Indians) movement, which was reflected in the foundation in 1897 of the Indische Bond (Indies Union), followed by the Indische Partij (Indies Party) in 1912. In an attempt to broaden its base, the party's initiator sought contact with the Indonesian higher and lower nobility. An indication of the early pursuit of self-rule was the Indo-European Union's support for the Soetardjo Petition, a motion adopted by the People's Council in 1936 calling for a timetable to move the country towards independence. The urge for independence within the large Indo-European community gained momentum in the first decades of the twentieth century (Bosma 1989; Bosma and Raben 2008: 276-334). In the Netherlands, this option of secession was vigorously opposed. The transfer of powers to the colonial state – through, for example, the establishment of the People's Council and municipal councils in the larger urban centres – was monitored with suspicion. The metropolitan headquarters wanted to retain firm control over the future of colonial custody and the magnates of big business were of the same opinion. Any suggestion of self-rule was resolutely crushed from the Dutch side. It was essential to ensure that the European population in the East Indies did not allow itself to be led by self-interest, and switch their loyalties from attachment to the homeland to separation. Aware of this eventuality, Baud had already insisted in 1826 that recruitment for the colonial administration should continue to take place only in the Netherlands. Only young white and well-bred men from the better-off classes, who were able to bear the cost of their academic training themselves, would be eligible as candidates for the civil service. Baud envisaged the formation of an elite corps that would be guided by the interests of the homeland and remain connected to it through strong kinship and marital ties. Conditioned in this spirit, they would not be tempted to stay on, like the many families of settlers had opted for, to split away from where they

came from and desert their patria, as had happened in America (Fasseur 1993: 76, 164, 486).

The second possible variant to emerge from the late-colonial structure of the East Indies could have been its embodiment in an apartheid regime, such as that introduced in South Africa in 1948. The harshness of censorious racial segregation and its institutionalization in legislation reflected a mindset that enjoyed widespread support among the white caste. Governor-General De Jonge again fuelled this gestalt by stubbornly sticking to the conventional colonial designation of the mass of the population, saying, 'There is nothing derogatory in the use of the word *Inlander*.' He rejected the term 'Indonesian' because of its political connotations (Van der Wal 1968: 189). The impetus in the same direction came primarily from capitalist business. The Political Economic Union, founded in 1919 to oppose the promises of the Ethical Policy, acted as a conservative platform for a sustained racial consciousness among the white bourgeoisie in the East Indies.

The Fatherland Club brought together a wide variety of highly opinionated views which, however, strongly disagreed on how to proceed. At the centre of these covertly held deliberations was the nature of the link with the Netherlands. Rejecting ethical notions and a democratization process that was not compatible with the character of Eastern society, advocates of more Indo-centric politics believed that the Dutch colonial task was nearing completion. European immigrants would stay on to take the development of country and people into their own hands. But this plea for self-government by no means suggested abdication of the homeland. On the horizon of the coveted autonomy still lay a multinationally framed Indonesia. This commonwealth would also allow the members of the Indonesian elite limited admission to power and authority, provided they were sufficiently familiar with the Dutch habitus and willing to keep the Indonesian masses captive in subalternity.

The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 considerably shortened the distance between the Netherlands and the East Indies. Together with the transition to steam navigation and embryonic air traffic, this had a major impact on the relationship between metropole and colony. Of equal significance was the advent of telecommunications, especially telephony, telegraphy and radio, which boosted the speed, intensity and frequency of communications. The Nederlandsch-Indische Omroep Maatschappij (Dutch East Indies Radio Broadcasting Corporation) began operating in 1934 with separate programmes for Western and non-Western listeners (Kuitenbrouwer 2019).

The visible and vocal presence of the metropole and its middle-class way of life was underlined by the immigration of more and more white

women. Engagement in intra-ethnic marital ties and family formation encouraged the emergence of a bourgeois lifestyle imported from the homeland. In its social behaviour, the growing caste of Europeans replicated more than before what was popular 'at home', in social interaction as well as in clothing, food and use of consumer goods. These expressions of Dutchification contributed to rejection of the idea of secession. Still, the permanent embedding of the white segment of the population in the colony seemed gradually to have become a more attractive option. Those who had previously been *totoks* making their way in a foreign culture as best they could were now expatriates who retreated for their leisure to their own social clubs, swimming pools, tennis parks and holiday resorts. While racialized intercourse at work sites could not be avoided and was more ritualized than segregated, exclusion of contact with non-Europeans (other than servants) was a more emphatically endorsed code of conduct in spending leisure time (Beynon 1995).

The East Indies treasured as the jewel in the Dutch crown

Of greater significance in containing and condemning the idea of colonial finality culminating in independence was that discussing this form of abdication remained taboo in the Netherlands. The colony was an extremely lucrative source of profit and wealth, and without this very considerable surplus, the Dutch economy would lose income that could not be dispensed with to fuel the steady rise in the metropolitan standards of living. The gatekeepers of capitalist enterprise unanimously shared this view. Business overseas was conducted from the homeland headquarters, had not yet taken the leap forward to multinational corporations. Its management continued to be run from where it had originated, with close links to the party leadership on the right side of the political plateau. As we have seen, Treub was a pivotal figure in this symbiosis, ensuring that colonial business continued to be practiced in Dutch confinement. Like Colijn before him, Bonifacius C. de Jonge made the transition from the directorship of the BPM to the political arena. In 1931, he took office as one of the last Governors-General of the Dutch East Indies. His reactionary governance from beginning to end signified abolition of the last vestiges of the Ethical Policy. There could be no question of Indonesian self-rule in any form. Treub, Colijn and De Jonge were, in their various capacities, the political icons – though not the last ones as we shall see – of continuing the colonial mission within the framework of a Greater Netherlands.

Neoliberalism would not achieve dominance in the developed countries of the world until the last quarter of the twentieth century. But this doctrine of political economy had already made its appearance in the Dutch main colony towards the end of the nineteenth century flourished undisturbed in the decades that followed. Capitalist big business could count on far-reaching support from the colonial state and its directorate in the home country. The government imposed no restrictions on this unbridled enterprise and, moreover, saw to it that the labour it required would not be able to unite and raise the social question in resistance. A yoke of fierce restrictions and prohibitions crippled any impetus to collective action from below. Fingerprinting the massive workforce, as, for instance, in Sumatra's plantation belt – in the mid-1920s a quarter of a million men and women – was considered an appropriate means to this end. It enabled the detection and arrest of coolies who either behaved rebelliously, evaded their labour contracts by sabotaging their workload or running away. Not content with the fingerprinting office established by the government, the employers' organizations, with the veiled consent of the regional bureaucracy, also set up their own intelligence apparatus to gather information on agitation brewing at member enterprises 'to identify the political mentality of the workers they had hired and to alert not only the employers, but also the district officials immediately when dangerous tendencies or undesirable currents threaten the corporate security and social order'. In 1927, the Governor of East Sumatra advised the colonial headquarters to eradicate lawless agitation 'by fire and sword'(De Greeve 2017: 36-37).

The confluence of private exploitation and repression of civil protest characterized the late-colonial state. New regions were opened up for capitalist business, with the government following and providing support. This economic policy was lauded by proponents of free enterprise as a model for large-scale exploitation of the natural resources in the underdeveloped islands of the archipelago. It is a view that would remain dominant in governance and politics until the end of colonial rule. Yet critical reflections on this capitalist mode of neoliberalism in Indonesia's multinational state formation have not been entirely lacking. Indicative is the treatise by J. de Waard published in 1924. He argued that land lying uncultivated had been given almost free of charge to the concessionaires to be turned into highly profitable plantations by labour brought in from elsewhere. The annual profit was almost as high or sometimes even higher than the capital initially invested in large-scale agro-industrial and mining business. De Waard's reasoning did not differ substantially from that of opponents of this

globalized economic doctrine one century later. He argued that the often enormous profits were mainly paid out as bonuses to company managers and dividends to shareholders, while the workforce of these companies and inhabitants of the newly cultivated area barely shared in the inordinately high proceeds. Consequently, as J. de Waard commented in his summing up, the accumulated capital left the colony rather than being invested in its further development.

> The outer regions have only a small population who are, moreover, not inclined to work at the enterprises. The entrepreneurs must therefore import cheap labour from overpopulated Java or the Chinese manpower pool and the state, which must remain at a distance in all other respects, must give them the guarantee that this labour will remain at their disposal. This was achieved through the *coolie ordinance with the penal sanction, which threatens breach of the employment contract and inadequate work performance* with punitive measures and is presented by the Indian business world as also indispensable and beneficial to Indian society as a whole.... Opening up the outer regions, they say, transforms endless forests and inaccessible swamps into prosperous areas; it raises the economic as well as the moral level of the population; it brings the Western concepts of order, regularity, industriousness and hygiene to indolent, backward and lazy tribes. It is therefore the duty of everyone, but especially of the government, to give capital a free hand in this development process and above all to maintain the penal sanction. (De Waard 1924: 3)

De Waard was backed up in his views by Sebald Rutgers, who in 1946 published a classic Marxist essay on colonialism in the last decades before Indonesian independence. As director of public works of Sumatra's East Coast between 1911 and 1915, Rutgers was well acquainted with the situation in this stronghold of plantation capitalism. What he observed at close quarters will have strengthened him in his decision to turn his back on membership of the Social-Democratic Labour Party and clearly demonstrate his revolutionary affiliation within the then Communist Party of the Netherlands (Mellink 1987). The difference of opinion on the colonial issue expressed the fierce antagonism that divided the leftist political camp on the home front. Although social-democratic spokesmen denounced the exploitation and oppression of labour in 'our Indies', they rejected communist doctrine and practice as a means to resolve this problem. Distancing themselves from the radical call for global closing of class ranks effectively amounted to a steadily growing alignment with bourgeois parties on the right flank

of the political spectrum. The price paid for becoming slowly acceptable as a coalition partner in a multiparty alliance was embracing capitalism in a somewhat tamed format as the dominant mode of production and included compromising on how to bridge the vast gap between capital and labour. The accelerating split between socialism and communism on the European political stage was not only triggered by major differences on the settlement of the social question but was also spiralled by the divergent views of social-democratic and communist parties on dealing with the colonial question. Albert Sarraut, the French minister of colonies in the aftermath of World War I, labelled communism as the greatest threat to successful colonial development (Thomas 2005). It implied, of course, abandoning the call on solidarity in a transnational alliance of workers of the world as a cornerstone of their foundational credo. Assessment of the colonial question and the consequences drawn from it was, of course, not limited to the social-democratic movement in the Netherlands but applied equally to its sister parties and trade unions in other European metropoles of imperialism. The spectacular reshaping of the leftist political platform in the homelands of European colonialism explains why social democracy in the postcolonial nation states of the Global South was doomed to fail in finding a following among the working classes.

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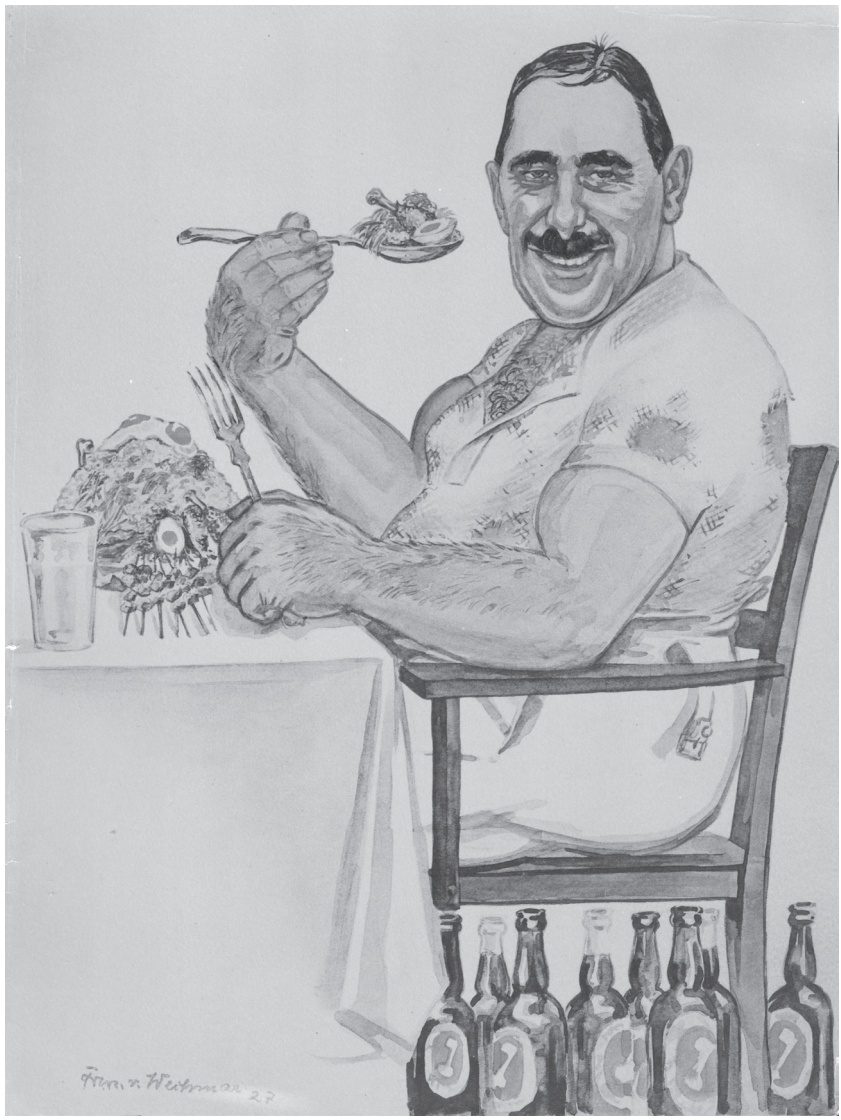

Figure 12.1. A jovial colonial having *rijsttafel* with bottles of beer under his chair, by Eberhard Freiherr von Wechmar. Source: E.F. von Wechmar, *Delianer. Collectie lithografieën* (Delians: A collection of lithographs), Medan, 1927.

12 The Denial of Freedom and Its Impact on Indonesia's Early Statecraft

> [A]ctually we've never became independent. We thought we could make everything more just, but we were 300 years behind. That makes it a difficult struggle. The other side was stronger. The capitalist system has established itself everywhere. But as long as this system prevails, the whole world will go to ruin and the whole environment will be destroyed. The jungles of Sumatra, of Kalimantan, of the whole of Africa, are all being decimated.
> – Cisca Pattipilohy, quoted in David van Reybrouck, *Revolusi* (2020: 516-517)

Merdeka

On 17 August 1945, two days after the Japanese surrender, leaders of the nationalist movement declared the independence of Indonesia. The Japanese invasion had been hailed in early 1942 as deliverance from colonial enslavement. What was supposed to pass for liberation was, however, soon perceived as oppression. Far from bringing the promised Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere into view, the occupation ended in economic degradation and a disruption of daily life that cost the lives of three million Indonesians. The renewed subjugation to foreign domination for three and a half years did create more space for expressing and mobilizing nationalist aspirations than had been the case under Dutch rule. Still confined within imperialist domination, a socio-cultural vanguard from the increasingly aware middle class tried to pave the way for an anti-colonial, anti-Western future in a state system that would be founded on a home-grown identity and an Asian pattern of values based on it (Mark 2018). Especially among the younger generation, the spirit for the coming revolutionary struggle was awakening and began to ignite even before the Japanese surrender. The memory of this ignited fire has been preserved and cherished more than the changing of the guard that preceded it (Maier et al. 1995). The declaration of freedom penetrated in fragmentary form to the Dutch community held captive in camps. Deprived of news about the course of the war, the detainees, with men and women separated, lacked reliable information about the social upheaval that had occurred. They responded with disbelief and exasperation to the announced end of colonial rule. Wim Wertheim noted that his companions shrugged their shoulders at the news. In his

wife's prison camp, the mood was similar, as she wrote in her diary at the end of August:

> We read in a vernacular newspaper, which has finally arrived, that Sukarno and Hatta declared an Indonesian Republic on 17 August. Most of us were merely angry or cheerful about this 'ridiculous fuss': 'Soon our men will put an end to this', they said. (Wertheim and Wertheim-Gijse Weenink 1991: 286)

Restoration of the old order failed, but the change of rule took more than four years. The long duration of decolonization stemmed from the Netherlands' tough resistance to the transfer of sovereignty. Neither the colonial machinery nor the political coalition in the homeland paid heed to the wave of decolonization that swept through Asia after the end of World War II. They persisted in arguing that it was imperative to continue the colonial mission because the Indonesian people and their leaders were far from capable of self-rule. As B.C. de Jonge, one of the last governors-general, had put it in jingoistic hubris when he left in 1936: 'I believe that, after three hundred years of working here in the East Indies, we will need another three hundred years before the Indies will perhaps be ripe for some form of independence' (Quoted in Van den Doel 1996: 244).

This spirit was undiminished when the occupying power returned. It lacked any understanding for the reproach that restoration of colonial relations by a nation state which had just celebrated its liberation from German occupation amounted to a declaration of war. This comparison was considered inappropriate because Dutch rule was not aimed at anything other than what it had previously claimed: to promote the development of the country and its people. Within circles of the former administration, bewilderment prevailed over the Indonesian struggle for freedom. Its own perceptions exhibited far-reaching incomprehension: '[T]he Dutch in the archipelago did not at all feel themselves to be colonial exploiters and oppressors; they believed they were managing a model colony and were repeatedly praised for doing so by foreign experts' (Van Doorn 1994: 248).

The Dutch East Indies were considered an overseas part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Regarding this territory as occupied or conquered was a malicious misconception. The task was to restore the peace and order desired by the mass of the population, and to protect them from an illegal movement that fortunately had little following. Its leaders were to be distrusted even more because of their collaboration during the Japanese occupation. Defectors from the national cause were also the young men

in the homeland who resisted participating in the military struggle that broke out in Indonesia. The only political movement to declare itself in favour of liberation from colonial oppression was the Communist Party of the Netherlands. There were many among the conscientious objectors who supported this position. For refusing to join the troops sent to Indonesia to fight and restore 'normalcy', they were sent to prison, and also suffered lasting damage in their social lives for their subversive behaviour.

Crushing the call for independence

Bolstered by the assistance of numerous militant groups, especially the revolutionary youth movement, Indonesia showed its willingness to fight for its freedom against the armed force deployed from the Netherlands. The latter took possession of the main cities and tried to secure the lines of communication between them. Outside the officially established Indonesian army, militia groups had emerged in many places, over which the authorities on both sides of the conflict had no control (Lucas 1991). Sometimes popular anger was directed against their own aristocracy or militias protected their own neighbourhoods or communities. But they could also be or become gangs, pursuing their victims of various ethnicities or political affiliations with brutal violence. They engaged in looting, robbery and extortion. Regulated to unregulated resistance on the one side, and lack of sufficient troops and equipment to settle the escalating conflict by force of arms on the other, resulted in a power vacuum. This period of twilight of authority, which continued from late 1945 to early 1946 or even later, was known as *Bersiap* (Be ready). It was a raucous and hideous outburst of vigilantism committed by civilian militants from both sides (Toer 1950 and 1952;Birney 2016). Some of these gangs were revolutionary minded and operated where republican authority had not yet been established. Often the actions they undertook stemmed from their own lust for power and gain, and their criminal slant was paramount. This could culminate in them joining the enemy camp and taking a stand against the republican army if a more advantageous outcome could be expected. Thus, a notorious bandit chief surrendered with a large number of his followers only to be conscripted under Dutch command into what became Hare Majesteit's Ongeregelde Troepen (Her Majesty's Irregular Troops, HAMOT). This unit was formed with the prior promise of immunity and was deployed to carry out terror missions without the threat of being punished for systematically committed war crimes (Cribb 1991: 139-53; Limpach 2016: 105-9).

The return of the former rulers' bureaucratic machinery to the occupied territory took place from Batavia/Jakarta in the shape of the Nederlandsch-Indische Civiele Administratie (Netherlands Indies Civil Administration, NICA). But the exercise of effective authority did not initially extend much beyond a few larger cities, mainly on Java. Although Indonesians were now also eligible for admission to this corps, the requirements for competence, experience and disposition were such that the new-style civil service remained a white stronghold, especially in the higher ranks. The construction of this government apparatus was laborious because it soon became clear that Indonesian officials and chiefs had little or no faith in the restoration of Dutch authority in the East Indies 'for the good of country and people' (Zijlmans 1985: 187).

International pressure contributed to the need to break the deadlock. An interim administration under British leadership initiated consultations between the Republik Indonesia and the Dutch authority, pushed for an acceptable settlement for both sides and oversaw the working out of a ceasefire compromise, the details of which took mutually a long time to complete. The negotiations conducted in Linggadjati culminated in an agreement signed in Batavia/Jakarta in late November 1946. It entailed the recognition of de facto authority exercised by the Republic over Java and Sumatra, the formation of two constituent states, Borneo and the East Indies, and the incorporation of these composite parts into a Dutch-Indonesian Union with the king at its head. The Dutch government consented to the agreement reached by H.J. van Mook and Sutan Sjahrir, leaders of the respective negotiating delegations, with the condition that a financial-economic arrangement be added to it, with tough safeguards to protect Dutch business activity after independence. The Indonesian side was dissatisfied with the limited sovereignty the Republic would be granted, confined in a federation in which the colonial ruler retained considerable control. Sjahrir, the most moderate of the nationalist leaders, had been acceptable to the Netherlands as a negotiating partner for this very reason. Radical currents in the Republic turned against him because they felt the outcomes of the negotiations were too meagre. Growing criticism of what little had been achieved led to his resignation as the country's first prime minister.

Maintaining the imperial unity of the kingdom

The response to the outcome of the negotiations in metropolitan political circles was equally critical. Whereas opponents of the Linggadjati Agreement

in Indonesia felt that too little had been achieved, the reception in the Netherlands was the complete opposite. Too much had been given away that needed to be preserved, and too quickly. Even before parliament had an opportunity to express an opinion, disagreement on the draft agreement was already emerging in the bosom of the government. Apart from the comment that further agreements on the continued role of the homeland were necessary, the recognition of the sovereignty of the Republic over the heartland of the archipelago – Java and Sumatra – also met with strong opposition. In the eyes of the critics, the intended multinational federation was too non-binding and gave the other side the opportunity to withdraw from it. The umbrella union needed to be given greater weight and equipped with wider powers. The draft was adjusted, so that it became a 'dressed-up' edited version of the agreement, to which the Republic would also have to commit itself. Two versions of the agreement were now circulating: the 'bare' Linggadjati Agreement on which negotiators had agreed, and the 'dressed-up' version that had been adjusted by the Dutch government. The former was signed and ratified in the spring of 1947. While the Dutch representatives adhered to the updated version, the republican delegation refused to conform to any other reading than that laid down in the original draft.

The procedural aberration and its twofold interpretation was the outcome of much political nitpicking on both sides. Inside and outside the Dutch parliament, right-wing politicians and their liberal and Christian parties made it clear that there could be no question of breaking up the unity of the empire. In the 1920s and 1930s, it had become customary to refer to colonies as 'overseas entities' of The Netherlands.

Once the People's Council had been instituted, the muted voices within this pseudo-assembly speaking up for pro-nationalist reforms became more vocal but this insistence also gave vent to a conservative backlash to defuse this anti-imperial clamour. In 1929 a caucus around the Council for Enterprise in the Netherlands-Indies and the staff of the 'oil faculty' of indology in Utrecht launched the political-economic weekly *De Rijkseenheid* (the Imperial Unity), already referred to chapter 10 (Taselaar 1999). Its mission statement was paean to Dutch rule overseas and fiercely opposed all that came close to anti-colonial sentiments Squandering its immense trove of wealth in the tropics was seen in its editorial writings not only seen as the inevitable consequence of the swelling call in Indonesia for self-rule. Metropolitan forces on the left side of the political spectrum stood equally accused of willing to betray and relinquish this precious heirloom so successfully built up over three centuries by its founding fathers. Disconcerted by the defeatist mentality that according to these colonial diehards gained

ground, the editors published in 1933 a manifesto calling for an Alliance of National Recovery to back up their ultraconservative politics with imperial unity as its core business. In the 1930s both governor-general De Jonge and minister of the colonies Colijn were fully dedicated to this course of action which replaced earlier attempts at reconciliation by harsh repression.

The last issue of *De Rijkseenheid* was published in May 1940 when the Netherlands were already under German occupation. But with reinvigorated zeal this reactionary lobby resurfaced shortly after the end of World War II. In response to Indonesia's declaration of independence, their proponents in both politics and big business gave vent to unabated adherence to this legal sham which meant a return to the status quo antebellum. Restoration of peace and order with military force was inevitable and instantly required, to avoid a messy compromise. To rally sufficient support for this opposition, it was essential to mobilize public opinion. The Nationaal Comité Handhaving Rijkseenheid (National Committee for the Maintenance of Imperial Unity, NCHR), set up early in 1947 for this purpose, raised funds and launched a campaign to force the government to this frontal change of course. Headquartered in The Hague, it kept in touch with branches throughout the country, directing activities and distributing them to various subcommittees. Besides a series of prominent politicians, including P.S. Gerbrandy (wartime prime minister in exile) and C.I.J.M. Welter, several senior military officers, including a retired general, H. Winkelman, and a former colonial policymaker and now member of the Council of State, J.W. Meijer Ranneft, joined the committee's board. A petition addressed to the Dutch parliament appealed to patriotic and royalist sentiments, and loyalty to a glorious past (*De Banier* 1947). The right-wing politicians in this group expressed their objections more vociferously, speaking of violation of the constitution, breach of authority and undermining the national interest. Social democrats and other leftists who insisted on recognition of the Republik Indonesia, were roundly accused of treason.

In his depiction and analysis of this lobby group, R.J.J. Stevens (1996) highlighted its political contours. Without detracting from this, I wish to draw particular attention to the role of the capitalist business community. This was bent on securing its investments, maintaining access to the rich natural resources in the Indonesian archipelago and/or assuring its market. Of course, the economic argument was prominent in the propaganda. Apart from the fact that the Netherlands would sink down to the rank of Denmark in the world order, there was the bleak prospect of a significant drop in income for the Dutch people: *The Indies lost, disaster born.* Behind the lobbying of conservative politicians, big business was directly involved in

the protest movement. Although their CEO's were not involved in its leadership, the agenda of action was drawn up in closed consultation with them. The ample budget available to the NCHR did not come from the collection boxes circulated at demonstrations and rallies, but was provided by trading houses, banks, shipping lines, and plantation and mining companies. The largest donations were made by the Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij (Netherlands Trading Society, NHM), Bataafse Petroleum Maatschappij (Batavian Oil Company, BPM/ Royal Dutch Shell), the Heineken brewery and plantation associations, with the agro-industrial syndicate and the barons of the sugar and textile industries leading the way. These donors stipulated secrecy in order not to be accused of violating the statutory rules (Stevens 1996: 127). Gerbrandy invited rightist politician-cum-scholar Carel Gerretson to join the group, as a reputed defender of the interest of the Greater Netherlands interest, in the role of in-house ideologist.

In this prelude to an escalating conflict on the relationship with the 'overseas territories', the political fault line that was emerging in the Netherlands was underexposed. The inclusion of the Labour Party in the ruling coalition implied a drastic revision of economic policy. The strategic thinking that underpinned it meant that business would have to deal with more government interference than before. This curtailing of the free market applied not least to the exploitation of the prime colonial domain by big business. The left of the political spectrum fired off a warning shot, announcing that capital would no longer have a free hand in conducting business overseas. What had previously been squarely rejected as pandering to the ethical course was now held to be normative for business: decent treatment of labour and recognition of trade unions to represent its interests. Referring to the glaring lack of social justice, Labour Party leader Koos Vorrink spoke with satisfaction of the blow that awaited the 'sugar barons' after the Netherlands had retreated from the colonies (Baudet 1975: 431). Hein Vos, appointed minister of trade and industry in 1945, had co-authored the Labour plan ten years earlier, together with Jan Tinbergen. As a minister, Vos showed himself to be an outspoken supporter of Indonesian independence. The colonial conference of the SDAP had also spoken out in similar terms in 1930, albeit with the caveat that loosening the ties had to be gradual and conciliatory, to avoid catastrophic damage on both sides of the colonial relationship. Containment of racial anger in the homeland was a precondition for this (Cramer 1930: 19; Van der Zee 1931: 149-53). The fiercest criticism of minister Vos's plans for socialization and the introduction of a planned economy came from the Council for Enterprise in the Dutch East Indies, discussed in the preceding chapter. It confirmed the far-reaching opposition, which socialist ideas encountered in the late colonial milieu until

the very end. The economic lobby lent support to extra-parliamentary pressure to force the government decide to put down the rebellion in Indonesia and restore Dutch authority. This insistence was reinforced by the surmise that the Republic would come under communist influence. Big business feared it would have to deal with a radicalized trade union movement and a working class aware of its rights, with nationalization of Western companies as the ultimate consequence (Bank 1981: 234).

The capitalist lobby

The Council for Enterprise in the Dutch East Indies in The Hague and the Indische Ondernemersbond (Union of Entrepreneurs in the Indies) in Batavia not only followed the political negotiations closely, but also put their stamp on their course and outcomes (Taselaar 1998: 512-17). This direct involvement was kept from public view for fear of its damaging effect in the shifting political climate. Jan Bank based his essay on economic lobbying on the internal deliberations within these organizations and the outcome of the positions they took on the negotiations. The council avoided openly taking a stand. According to Jongejan (the chairman of the Council for Enterprise since 1937), this was prompted by the realization that then any influence would be lost and any action on which the council would speak out openly would acquire a capitalist stamp (Bank 1981: 234).

The council had no official contacts with political parties but relied on personal connections with their leadership. The director of the Netherlands Bank, for instance, was attached to the general committee set up to revise the Linggadjati Agreement by order of the cabinet. D.U. Stikker, who belonged to the right wing of the Labour Party and was foreign minister from 1948, made a name for himself as an advocate for Dutch business interests after Indonesia's independence. This involvement resulted in the Republic recognizing the claims of non-Indonesians for restoration of their rights and restitution of property in its territory. Van Mook had been unwilling to endorse that preferential treatment, indicating that the transfer of sovereignty to Indonesia meant the end of the privileges which the colonial administration was accustomed to bestowing on expatriate business. In a letter to him, the Union of Entrepreneurs in the Indies urged a constitutional construction that would leave all the legal provisions of the Dutch East Indies intact. In a subsequent meeting, Van Mook made it clear that this was out of the question. He chastised old-style management and called for labour to be treated better, more humanely. Shocked, the union's

leaders went to see prime minister Beel and minister Jonkman of Overseas Territories to register their objections. There they found a sympathetic ear, both for their indignation and their wishes.

The Council for Enterprise and the Union of Entrepreneurs in the Indies did not operate as a closed unit and their divergent considerations of their future role and importance revealed divisions between them. The disagreement included differing assessments of the strength of Indonesian nationalism. The conflict came to light when the chairman of the Union came out in favour of agreeing to the draft Linggadjati Agreement and attempted to persuade his supporters to follow him. This incurred the displeasure of the chairman of the Council for Enterprise in the Dutch East Indies in The Hague, who called this political stance 'highly undesirable'. He silenced his union colleague and, shortly after his arrival in Batavia on a working visit a month later, forced him to resign. The incident exposed the relationship of superordination and subordination between what were supposedly sister organizations. Employers and company managers in the East Indies needed more autonomy to respond to the changing political tide. Their headquarters in the homeland refused to give in to this demand and flatly rejected the suggestion of moving their head offices to the East Indies. In a more general sense, the emerging political turnaround would augur the transition from colonial to multinational business in the postcolonial aftermath.

The lobbyists exerted persistent pressure on the authorities to use force of arms to seize lost property in Republican territory. But the government accepted the Linggadjati Agreement as a political fait accompli. In the spring of 1947, the general committee conducting the negotiations was authorized to formally sign the agreement, much to the fury of the opposition parties who continued to insist on maintaining the vainglorious unity of the empire. The leading figures in the NCHR, headed by Gerbrandy, plotted a coup to prevent the transfer of sovereignty. The scant reports on this planned putsch focus on its political contours. The plan was, with the support of former World War II resistance fighters, to return Gerbrandy to his wartime role in exile as prime minister. There was no mention of the involvement of big business in this plan, and substantiated evidence of it is unlikely to be found. Disappointment had been regularly expressed from these quarters about 'a continuing tendency to follow the line of least resistance'. This disapproval focused on the 'appalling degree of indulgence' to republican wishes. Liquidation of Labour Party chairman Koos Vorrink would signal the start of the right-wing revolution. This had been decided in consultation with Gerbrandy 'to raise tension among the people' (*Het Vrije Volk* 1979). It is clear from this wording that the Indonesia issue had given rise to the conspiracy. Part of

the plot was to nominate prince Bernhard, the husband of crown princess Juliana, for the position of governor of the East Indies. The conspiracy further aimed to denounce the entire left wing of the domestic political landscape as being guilty of high treason. The Christian Democratic-Labour coalition, which had barely got off the ground, needed to be disbanded to exclude the social democrats from government, because of their anti-national leanings. Historian Loe de Jong, who had been commissioned to write the chronicles of the Kingdom of the Netherlands during World War II, was convinced that Gerbrandy would have carried out a coup if he had received sufficient support from the military high command. The plot was called off shortly before it was due to be set in motion because the plans had been leaked. Steps had already been taken that meant it was likely to fail. The mayor of Amsterdam had a letter prepared, calling on the people of the city to remain calm and support the lawful authorities. Although the attempt to seize power was cancelled, opposition to the ruling coalition's compromise persisted unabated. In well attended meetings throughout the country the Committee for Imperial Unity called for an end to the still ongoing talks with the Indonesian leadership and, for the Dutch armed forces which had arrived in great numbers to suppress the 'revolt'. Hoping to be given a free hand by the USA and Britain to go ahead and in search of a pretext to do so, the Dutch government launched a public relations campaign which framed the nationalist movement as a communist plot to seize power.

Operation Product and failed pacification

Under this still very influential extra-parliamentary pressure, the government hardened its attitude towards the Republic. Manipulated information released by military intelligence at the initiative of commander-in-chief of the army general S.H. Spoor played an important role in this development (Verhoeven 1986; Stevens 1992). The close involvement of the economic lobby is clear to see in the implementation of the war plan. The first 'police action' that began on 21 July 1947 and continued until 4 August was known as 'Operation Product'. It could not have been made clearer what it was about: seizing the well-developed areas where large-scale plantation and mining enterprises had been established. The rural areas captured from the Republic were 'purged'. District and village chiefs who had stayed on and thus defected to the enemy were replaced by officials who claimed to be loyal to Indonesian authorities. A total of 1,124 plantations were reclaimed by their Dutch owners (Bank 1981: 240).

ONDER DE ROOD·WITTE VLAG
TERREUR EN ARMOEDE
JAPAN
ONDER HET ROOD·WIT·BLAUW
ORDE EN WELVAART
VOORLICHTING VAN DE STICHTING „INDIË IN NOOD" ANDRIES BICKERWEG 5 · S-GRAVENHAGE

DE WAARHEID
OVER INDIË
1 Wij willen géén nieuwen Java-oorlog en géén reactionnaire koloniale politiek.
2 Geen regeering ter wereld duldt echter bandi-tisme, intimidatie en terreur. Ook de onze mag dit niet.
3 De extremisten zijn door de Japanners opgeleide en bewapende Indonesiërs. Zij zijn derhalve fascisten en als zoodanig gelijk te stellen met de Nederlandsche W.A., Landwacht, S.S., enz.
4 Deze fascisten maken zich nog dagelijks schuldig aan mishandeling en vermoording van weerlooze van alle landaarden. Zij hebben met kanonnen geschoten op vrouwenkampen. De nationalisten staan hier blijkbaar machteloos tegenover.
5 Soekarno is de eenige collaborateur en oorlogs-misdadiger op de wereld, die tevens president is van een republiek. Zijn republiek is te Saigon door Japan in elkaar gezet.
6 Sjahrir en de zijnen vormen tezamen een kabinet van den president Soekarno, met wien zij gezegeld heerandelingen. Dit kabinet vertegen-woordigt NIET de bevolking van Java, nog minder die van Indië. De stem van de Indische volken kan zich door extremistische intimidatie en bruut wapengeweld niet doen hooren.
7 Onderhandelingen op DEMOCRATISCHEN grond-slag zijn in aller belang, zij kunnen slechts dan voor alle partijen bevredigend zijn, nadat een einde is gemaakt aan den extremistischen dwang en de chantagepolitiek.
8 De bevolking was ons tijdens de Japansche bezetting en bij de Japansche capitulatie vrien-delijk gezind. Wie het anders voorstelt, liegt.
9 Wordt aan de extremistische terreur en intimi-datie niet onmiddellijk paal en perk gesteld, dan beteekent dit behalve een afschuwelijke verarming van de geheele bevolking, den hongerdood van millioenen inheemschen op Java en Sumatra.
10 ORDE EN RUST zijn een gebiedende eisch voor een VOORUITSTREVENDE politiek.
Voorlichting van de Stichting
„INDIË IN NOOD!"
Andries Bickerweg 5, 's-Gravenhage

Figure 12.2. Dutch war propaganda, distorting the truth. Source: NIOD Instituut voor Oorlogs-, Holocaust- en Genocidestudies (NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies).

In the months that followed, the restoration of peace and order failed to materialize. Guerrilla fighters united in short-lived or more permanent gangs that wreaked havoc behind the drawn demarcation lines and committed attacks to capture weapons, persuade the workforce to sabotage production and disrupt road traffic with urban centres. What had been captured during the day was lost again during the night. Pacification meant tracking down and 'putting down' malcontents. The long tradition of atrocities committed against colonial subjects by soldiers in Dutch service and on the orders of their superiors was sustained to the bitter end. Although use of excessive brutality was continually denied in the final period, its systematic use is indisputable, while the responsibility of the army leadership and politicians for the violence has been greatly underplayed (Breman 2016). The constant insecurity was addressed by the creation of a paramilitary militia to guard the plantations. As a result of their intimidating actions, these security guards of capitalist business attracted the enmity of the local people. In addition, these pawns of the corporate leadership also had to deal with workers who refused to demonstrate the docile submission that had previously been taken for granted. The turnaround came from the radicalization of the land-poor and landless proletariat, which had grown considerably in size. This mass relied for its meagre existence on the employment provided by

large-scale agriculture, without being able to force an improvement in their livelihoods. The power vacuum created during the Japanese occupation, and more so the declaration of national independence that followed it, created the space needed to come out in open protest against the low pay and poor conditions of employment.

This growing awareness and the turn to collective action that accompanied it was due to the rapid rise of trade unionism, which had been curtailed by the colonial government. The establishment in late 1946 of the Sentral Organisasi Buruh Seluruh Indonesia (Central All-Indonesian Workers Organization, SOBSI), the central federation of trade unions, brought about a turnaround. As an umbrella organization, the federation set itself the goal of making the existence of the dispossessed class at the base of society visible and helping it to defend its economic, political and social rights. Initially, membership recruitment focused on labour in the urban economy and particularly public sector workers. In the following years, rural unions would recruit the largest numbers. Eventually, 800 unions would join this federation and estimates of membership range from at least one to more than two million. A national congress in Malang in 1947 called on the working class to organize and establish a socialist society. It was decided that the federation should join the Prague-based World Federation of Trade Unions. Early in 1950, a SOBSI delegation visited the People's Republic of China, only returning towards the end of the year. During their months-long stay, the delegates informed themselves on the role of the labour movement. They were taught about the structure of organization, mobilization of the rank and file and the position of trade unions in the social landscape. The leftist nature of the federation entailed seeking cooperation with all political parties that favoured shifting power to backward and disadvantaged sections of the population. It was in fact, however, the legalized Partai Komunis Indonesia (Communist Party of Indonesia, PKI) that encouraged the proletariat to be more vocal. Without actually being schooled in communist doctrine, it was mainly its willingness to take action insisting on land reforms that gave the PKI its growing following. Demands for wage increases were accompanied by work stoppages, demonstrations and rallies directed against the plantation management. The direct proximity of a dedicated cadre familiar with local affairs convinced the workforce of the union's willpower and strength to fight the employers and achieve success. In a strike in autumn 1950 called by Sarbupri (Sarekat Buruh Perkebunan Republik Indonesia, Estate Workers Union of the Republic of Indonesia), the union of workers in large-scale agriculture, work in 800 plantations was halted for almost a month. It was

a collective show of force that impressed workers and planters, as well as the Indonesian government (Moraal 2013: 9).

The labour movement had a striking presence in the Republic's political system from the beginning. As a forerunner among the unions, the SOBSI faction occupied most of the acquired space and initially under non-communist leadership. The radicalization in political participation resonated early on in its opposition to restrictions in the mandate of independence. The criticism particularly concerned the continuation of the prominent role of Dutch business. The class divisions that divided the Indonesian population had remained obscured in the nationalist movement. In the emerging political spectrum, they came into sharper focus. The Republic's leadership responded reluctantly and dismissively to these radical aspirations. Accepting them would mean cancellation of the agreement with the Netherlands even before it had been implemented. The divergent course of the major parties and the opposing interests underlying the escalating political conflict came to a head with the communist uprising that broke out in September 1948. The uprising was in fact the aftermath of a polarization, which had earlier led to clashes, paired with violence, between left, moderate and right wings. Unions crossing to another camp and shifting alliances only added to the confusion.

In the run-up to the uprising, Indonesia had undertaken to recognize the territory conquered by the Netherlands and to withdraw from it all its military units. The decision, taken in early 1948 under heavy US pressure, led to a breakdown of political confidence, which culminated in the fall of the government, in which leftist parties had also participated. On Sukarno's orders, Vice-president Hatta formed an extra-parliamentary cabinet. His anti-communist leanings meant that the PKI remained excluded from it. Hatta also proceeded to radically reorganize the army. He reduced its size, assured its loyalty to the legitimate authorities and disbanded units whose commanders were known to be communist. In-fighting broke out that seemed to indicate that the country was tipping towards civil war. The PKI leadership was forced to choos+e between suffering defeat or declaring a people's republic. Its proclamation eventuated an uprising in 1948 referred to as the Madiun Affair (Swift 1989; Poeze and Schulte Nordholt 2022). It took two months to put it down, during which time the ringleaders were killed or imprisoned, together with many thousands of military or civilian supporters. The ongoing struggle must be seen partly in the light of the Cold War mood that had emerged internationally.

In the Netherlands, Queen Wilhelmina had announced the advent of an independent and sovereign Indonesia, which would freely associate with

the Netherlands and its overseas territories. This choice of words once again aroused the ire of the Committee for the Maintenance of Imperial Unity. Gerretson chastised the Queen's radio speech as exceeding her mandate. He warned that 'no dynasty has ever survived the loss of the largest part of the state's territory'. In addition to this unacceptable extra-parliamentary criticism of the crown, there was also deep division within the parties in parliament and cabinet on how to proceed. The results of the mid-1948 elections pointed to strengthening of the right-wing parties. The Christian Democratic-Labour coalition had to be expanded to include this rightist political voice, in order to pass an amendment revising the Dutch constitution. This revision was made necessary by the upcoming transfer of sovereignty to Indonesia. The political shift resulted in a further hardening of the Dutch approach to dealing with the 'Indonesian question'.

Taking advantage of the Republic's weakened position, Dutch forces prepared to bring it to an end with a second 'police action'. In late 1948, Yogyakarta was occupied and the Indonesian state leaders captured, but victory was not forthcoming. The republican army had largely escaped capture and, together with irregular militia gangs, continued the war of independence in the form of guerrilla warfare in the countryside. Some of these free corps were former units that had been expelled from the republican army because of their communist sympathies. A resolution passed in the Security Council in late January 1949 condemned the Dutch offensive against the Republic and called for recognition of the Indonesian state. The tide had turned for good. It had become increasingly clear that the republican cause enjoyed a much larger following among the population than had previously been suspected. From the still unoccupied territory, this spirit of resistance asserted itself against the return of the old order. The still-fragile civil service followed the first police action closely to remain subordinate to the military strategy in the now 'liberated' areas. The violent manner in which peace and order were imposed stood in the way of actually taking care of civilian administration. In these ranks of governance, too, faith in the purpose and outcome of their set task, the restoration of lost authority, evaporated (Zijlmans 1985: 293-95).

The end in sight

On the Dutch side, the business community had already realized that the position of superior power had been lost. Well before the start of the second 'police action', consultations within this circle made it clear that it would not

succeed in defeating the enemy. The umbrella organizations concluded that an autonomous Indonesia was imminent and that the economic lobby would have to find its place within it on its own merits. The harsh suppression of the communist uprising was seen in the republican ranks as a political purge and an indication that far-reaching reforms, such as nationalization of large-scale agriculture and mining, would not happen straightaway. The Council of Enterprise in The Hague and the Entrepreneurs' Union in Jakarta were closely involved in the preparations for the roundtable conference that took place in the early autumn of 1949 in the Netherlands. Preventing discrimination against Dutch companies and residents was the focal point of the successful deliberations. The economic agreement reached meant that Indonesia would take into account the interests of the former colonial power. The Republic would also consult with The Hague in trade negotiations with third countries. In transferring profits, the Netherlands was given a preferential position over other countries. The Indonesian demand to establish the headquarters of companies in the country of operation was squarely rejected. Regarding nationalization, it was stipulated that if this were to happen, compensation had to be paid. A difficult compromise was reached on the Indies' national debt. Indonesia was presented with the bill for the military struggle that had been waged against it. The victory bonus did not materialize as, in this exceptional case, it was the loser who insisted on being reimbursed for the military costs of its defeat. Arbitration yielded an allocation of 4.5 billion guilders, a large part of this disputable debt claim, to be repaid in annual instalments (Lindblad 2008: 179). The economic lobby, which had vehemently opposed Indonesian independence in the early phase of this last colonial war and had supported and financed political opposition against the deal behind the scenes, changed sides and was now exerting pressure in the opposite direction. Acceptance of the outcome of the Round Table Conference consultations, with clauses favourable to corporate capitalism, prompted the right-wing party bloc in the Netherlands to urge ratification and short-term transfer of sovereignty. And so it happened, at the end of December 1949.

Decolonization was now complete and I will only briefly outline the course of events afterwards. That information is necessary to understand how the colonial past continued to have a major on the social dynamics of postcolonial Indonesia. To begin with, the early recovery of the PKI and its associated organizations deserves attention. SOBSI played a prominent role in that comeback, largely due to the change in PKI strategy implemented under the leadership of D.N. Aidit. It did not mean abandoning the end goal, the advent of a socialist society, but rather how it was to be achieved: no

longer through revolution, but through democratic-parliamentary means. Mobilizing the broad following required to achieve this proved successful. SOBSI was the main umbrella organization in charge of recruitment. In the elections of 1957, the PKI emerged as the fourth largest party, assuring it a say in the political system. This positioning, in turn, strengthened the labour movement in the economic field of action.

Small-scale meetings inspired the awakening political awareness of labour. Judging by the frequency of strikes and other labour action against employers or the government, the years between 1949 and 1952 give the impression of having been the most militant. Thereafter, the union seems to have subordinated the concrete demands of its members to achievement of broader political goals. The central leadership of SOBSI was keen to strengthen its grip on the federation and adhere more tightly to the course set by the PKI. That meant moderating its demands so as not to strain cooperation with other parties through displays of radicalism. The greater freedom of action previously enjoyed by member unions and their local chapters seems to have declined. Yet caution must be exercised in observing this shift from micro to macro interests. These interests were more political than economic and of unequal weight in the extent of their representation. The belief that SOBSI operated in the shadow of the PKI, was handed its directives from higher up and passed them on to its member unions in a top-down approach has long remained prevalent. It is a depiction that does not do justice to the autonomy that prevailed within the federation. The substantial freedom of action of the member unions resulted from the diverse nature of urban versus rural labour organizations and their further sectoral division. It was virtually impossible to manage this multilayered organization centrally, and individual unions themselves often presented their demands to employers and government. The strike that halted work in the large agricultural enterprises in 1950 was called by Sarbupri. The leadership of this union for plantation workers negotiated its own wage increases. Moreover, the autonomy that the unions had and took advantage of did not mean that their members adhered to the agenda set by the central leadership. Control over action taken – contact with the manag+ement, demonstrations, training meetings, getting together for sports or games – rested with the local branches. These decided with a high degree of independence on what to do, and how and when.

John Ingleson has elaborated on the character of the labour movement immediately after independence in the 1950s. It follows on from his earlier studies on labour and trade unions in the colonial economy and the entrapment in which both were then confined (Ingleson 1986, 2014). National

liberation immediately led to the posing of the social question that had been suppressed until then. The end of the reign of oppression made it possible to express the long-held claim for improvement in the deplorable conditions of employment and to take action that had previously been forbidden. The impression that the now loudly resounding demand for existential upliftment had an ideological connotation and was directed from above finds no confirmation in Ingleson's richly documented studies (2016: 31). In similar terms, P. van Dijk (2013) has also argued that the dynamics in reverse have been neglected. He refutes the view that upon joining a union affiliated with SOBSI, a worker became a communist disciple, being taught or schooling himself in its teachings. The awakened consciousness referred to meant enlarging and prolonging social awareness and the idea of being able to move freely, less bound in dependence than before. This change raised hopes of a better life even if they were not fulfilled immediately.

The Basic Agrarian Act of 1960, if implemented, should have benefited the land-poor and landless proletariat, but the promise was not fulfilled (Wertheim 1978: 149-50; Breman 1983: 122-26; White 2016). The announced land reform played a crucial role in the mass murder of its proponents when the New Order was introduced in 1965. To be known as a supporter of what amounted to a very moderate redistribution of agrarian property was enough to be tortured and murdered. The process of emancipation that the working people had embarked upon after liberation from foreign rule was interrupted even before they had emerged as a proletarian class in itself. Their awareness progressed no further than the claim for a decent, dignified existence, without becoming this solidifying into an ideological disposition. While the mindset that underpinned it was associated with a party political choice, it was not based on doctrinal conviction. This is a finding to which I was led by field research in rural West Java towards the end of the New Order regime (Breman 1995; Breman and Wiradi 2002).

In the course of decolonization, the agrarian proletariat had gained visibility and clout. In a protracted process, its size had gradually swelled, due to the loss of means of production needed to earn a living under their own steam. Achieving national freedom opened up the prospect of being able to enjoy better living standards. In his account on the country's labour movement after independence concluded that the colonial trope of 'the passive native', content with his lot in life, deferential to authority and with few material needs, was a myth that disguised state repression in the interest of foreign capital. In the open political environment in the early 1950s workers asserted their right to a decent life for themselves and their families and demanded that they be treated with justice and dignity. Their

determination to end colonial methods of labour control and get better wages and conditions surprised the Europeans who continued to manage the foreign-owned companies that dominated the economy and who were accustomed to few restraints on their management of Indonesian workers (Ingleson 2022: 344-47).

Workers in large-scale agriculture showed a striking eagerness to take collective action. Much more so than the unorganized proletariat in the village-based peasant economy. For the time being, it remained characterized by a greater complexity in the relationship between capital and labour, farmers and servants, respectively. The radicalization of the workforce on plantations particularly applied to enterprises under Dutch management. The return of these bosses resulted from the negotiated treaty with the Dutch government, but in fact amounted to denial of the political change of power. This was particularly true when the management continued with business on the old footing. A telling example was how the fingerprinting of the workforce on the plantations which had been introduced in the mid-1920s to identify, monitor and prevent labour unrest before it could openly blow up in 'coolie riots', went on as before after nationalization of Dutch property and takeover by Indonesian management of the agro-industry in East Sumatra (Damanik 2021). This tendency was met with a show of assertiveness that manifested itself in work stoppages, quarrels with supervisors and other displays of disobedience. In daily practice, the colonial past seemed not to be as over and done with as had been agreed. The reminder of it makes it understandable why the call to nationalize Dutch property and expel its management from the country came from this very quarter.

The Indonesian government did not respond to these insistent voices and made efforts to curb the radicalization of the working class. Minimal concessions were necessary to give in a little to the desire for improved living standards. It entailed raising the minimum wage, as when plantation work came to a standstill in 1950. But, on the other hand, in the aftermath of this large-scale industrial action, measures were taken that drastically restricted the use of the strike as a weapon (Ingleson 2016: 56). As a consequence, the working classes of the population, and above all their low- to unskilled segments, made little progress in the postcolonial era. For this sizeable mass, citizenship did not imply recognition on an equal footing. While the nation fought for its freedom, the backwardness and subordination of a large section of the property-poor and property-less classes persisted. In the first decade after independence, despite growing militancy among unionized wage workers, they remained excluded from full participation in the social system. It is an outcome confirmed by Ann Booth in her retrospective of

the 1950s: 'Food was scarce everywhere and those with little or no land were most severely hurt.... [M]any millions of Indonesians experienced falling incomes and living standards, especially in the last three or four years of the decade' (Booth 2010: 57, 62). Wim Wertheim came to a similar assessment during the field visit he made to rural Central Java in 1957 (Wertheim 1991). By the end of the twentieth century, this had changed little, as I observed on the basis of village research in the coastal plain of northern Java (Breman and Wiradi 2002).

Politically, an important shift occurred earlier and faster. Less than a year after the agreement reached with the Netherlands, Indonesia withdrew from the union that had confined the Republic in a federative association. On 17 August 1950, President Sukarno proclaimed the unitary state, which entailed the incorporation of parts of the archipelago that had remained separate from it. Opposition to this inclusion in the established nation state was suppressed in the years that followed. The resulting uprising meant that when the Koninklijk Nederlands Indisch Leger (Royal Netherlands East Indies Army, KNIL) was disbanded in 1950, the large contingent from the Moluccas were not allowed to return to their homeland. Just over half were absorbed into the Republican army, while an almost equal number were demobilized. A minority of the latter category, some 4,000 ex-soldiers, did not want to settle in the Republic. With their wives and children, they were shipped to the Netherlands for what was meant to be a temporary stay. Another thorny issue, which remained unresolved during the transfer of sovereignty, concerned the status of New Guinea. The Netherlands had been unwilling to cede this remnant of its colonial domain, on the pretext of emancipating the Papuan population for development and thus proving that the Netherlands felt obliged to complete its colonial mission. In the years that followed, the row escalated and threatened to turn into a full-blown war. Under American pressure, the transfer to Indonesia finally took place in 1962.

In the 1950s, the deterioration in the relationship between the two countries led to a growing unpopularity of non-Indonesian contingents – Indo-Europeans, Chinese and other 'Orientals' (of Arab or Indian origin) who, under colonial rule, acted economically and socially as a buffer between the European upper class and the Indonesian population. The continued presence of these ethnic minorities in advanced positions in government or business met with growing resistance because it was a reminder of the colonial past. Trade unions had pushed for the '*índonesianisi*' of senior staff and executive positions, but with little success. Failure to give in to this ambition stemmed from the belief that the management practices introduced

INDISCH LEGER
1912
HANDGELD f 225. voor Vrijwilligers
200. voor Miliciens.
Pensioenen in de week f.5.- f.13.
Onderluitenant f.24.
Inlichtingen bij den agent:
Miliciens van het Nederlandsche Leger die 3 jaren bij de Koloniale troepen hebben gediend, worden bij eene oproeping onder de wapenen voor Herhalings-Oefeningen van de lichting en het korps waartoe zij behooren, buiten die oproeping gelaten.

Figure 12.3. Recruitment for the Koninklijk Nederlands Indisch Leger (Royal Netherlands East Indies Army, KNIL). Source: NIOD Instituut voor Oorlogs-, Holocaust- en Genocidestudies (NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies).

by white bosses should be preserved (Lindblad 2010: 104; Ingleson 2022). Annoyance at this racist bias grew stronger as the political discord between the two countries increased. In 1957, the escalation of the New Guinea conflict culminated in the de facto expropriation of all Dutch property. This wave of nationalization included plantation and mining companies, trading offices, banks and public utilities such as the state railway and electricity supply. The agreements made at the Round Table Conference obliged Indonesia to compensate the owners. In arbitration, the amount claimed was reduced from 2.7 billion to almost 700 million guilders. This new drain on the government budget was fully paid out between 1973 and 2003.

Repatriation

Decolonization triggered a large-scale exodus of Dutch expatriates and Indo-European families who had collaborated with the white colonial upper class, usually with the Netherlands as their destination. But no small number who left Indonesia ultimately settled elsewhere in the world, preferably in Australia or North America. Nevertheless, between 1945 and 1968, a heterogenous mass numbering nearly 300,000 evacuated in stages to the Netherlands. The first and largest wave left Indonesia shortly after the surrender of Japan and the period that followed, known and discussed before as *Bersiap*.

Between August 1945 and November 1946 several thousands of Dutch and Indo-European people were killed by gangs of young Indonesian males who went on a rampage of plunder, rape and massacre. Many of those killed came from non-European groups including Chinese, Japanese POWs, Koreans (who had been brought in as mercenaries under Japanese occupation) and Indonesians, such as Moluccans and Javanese, and other people of higher economic standing. The wave of atrocious violence led to the forced emigration and worldwide diaspora of the Indo-European community. The Indonesian population had already been exposed to excessive violence during the Japanese occupation. Huge contingents of Javanese men were set to work, mostly within Southeast Asia, as forced labourers, known as *romushas*. Many hundreds of thousands did not survive this regime. In 1943, as a result of Japanese mismanagement, widespread famine broke out on Java, which also cost the lives of an estimated 2.5 million people.

The great majority of the colonial elite left Indonesia shortly after the transfer of power. They were mainly Dutch citizens who went back to the country where they were born and bred. A second exodus took place after the transfer of sovereignty in 1949. These were civil servants dismissed later from government service, staff of state bodies like the police and judiciary or those employed in public health, education or transport. A third wave of emigration occurred in 1957 when the dispute about the future status of New Guinea (Irian Jaya) put an end to the continued presence of the Dutch business community. All those belonging to the managerial ranks were forced to leave Indonesia, including many Indo-Europeans who had lost hope for a better future. Racially mixed and born in the Dutch East Indies, they faced an unknown future when they left. It was the high price they paid for their sustained support for Dutch rule. From the Indonesian perspective, novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer described them as 'tidak coklat dan juga tidak putih' ('not brown but not white, either'). Pramoedya was

their travelling companion in 1952 on the not very pleasant boat trip to the Netherlands. He was a welcome guest for a few months as part of cultural exchange, but almost all the other passengers left for good: Dutch expatriates returning to where they came from but still colonial in their views, and Indo-Europeans cast out of their homeland on their way to a permanent destination that was alien to them (Toer 1953). The latter experienced many problems in adjusting to a Dutch society that was reluctant to include these newcomers on par in their ranks. Frank Vermeulen has portrayed a number of them in their old age, tapping their memories of their way of life when they were growing up in the 1920s and 1930s. It was a habitus embedded in the compartmentalization inherent to colonial intercourse. The Eurasians were exposed as victims of racism from above, while practising racism themselves towards the Indonesian people (Vermeulen 2023).

An unpalatable aftermath

The attempt to transform the Netherlands into an extraterritorial, multinational state, sustained to the bitter end, was responsible for the slow and difficult progress of the process of decolonization. The colonial power's eagerness to preserve custody over a region that had been highly profitable for centuries ended in failure. The last colonial war the Netherlands fought in Indonesia ended in military defeat, behind which the failure in equal measure of the restored civilian administration was hidden. The designation of the Netherlands' military response as a police action aimed to present the war as an internal rebellion against lawful authority. By far the majority of deaths were incurred on the Indonesian side, in a ratio of at least 10 to 1. Besides the military personnel of the regular army or irregular combat groups, casualties also and mostly occurred among the civilian population. The fighting was accompanied by violations of international humanitarian law on both sides. On the Dutch side, it is striking that the orders for such atrocities were given or at least tacitly approved from above. The systematic nature and frequency with which this happened and the failure to prosecute those responsible pointed to a racist bias (*Over de grens* 2022). It represented the continuation of practices also rampant during colonial times. In the public presentation of the outcome of a large-scale research project by the government of the Netherlands after many years of pressure by an academic lobby backed up by dissenting voices from civil society, the directors of the three institutes in charge of the investigations concluded that the Dutch troops had been guilty of excessive violence. This summing

up of the findings carefully toned down what according to many critics should have been brandished as war criminality. The evasive terminology prompted Remco Raben and Peter Romein, two members of the team of investigators to challenge, in a follow-up study the euphemistic moderating of the shocking abuses, if not ordered than at least condoned and filtered in routine colonial style by the military, judicial and political apex (Raben and Romein 2023). After the transfer of authority to the Republik Indonesia, the country was left destitute and with a ruined infrastructure. The Netherlands' demand for compensation for the costs of warfare saddled Indonesia with a long-standing debt and the obligation to repay it. The conditions imposed on Indonesia to tolerate and facilitate the continued presence of Dutch businesses at the heart of the economy initially contributed to the lack of economic growth. The most important of the confining provisions made at the Round Table Conference were the permission obtained for the unlimited transfer of corporate profits and no obligation for the partial and much-needed reinvestment of profits (Lindblad 2008: 38-39). The first postcolonial occupational census in 1953 showed that of the workforce of 30 million (out of a total population of 80 million), almost two-thirds were engaged in agriculture, just over a tenth in industry, while the remaining quarter was split between transport, construction, government employment, trade and services. It meant that virtually no sectoral dispersion had occurred until independence. Moreover, all this economic activity was overwhelmingly based on casual and unregulated employment and with frequent changes of job or part-time engagement in other branches of industry.

The subordination of the Indonesian population to increase the benefits of colonial rule devolved into outright repression when resistance to it took collective form in trade union activity Although the labour movement in the metropole had not failed to denounce the far-reaching exploitation and oppression of the colonial workforce, it had been neither able nor eager to turn the tide, also not when Indonesia was obliged to fight for freedom. For political reasons of a domestic nature – accession to government power and the need to find money to rebuild the national economy after World War II – the Labour Party was cajoled to join the attempt to restore the colonial relationship (Hansen 1977). By participating in the vicious war against decolonization and aligning itself in a coalition of conservative politics, this social-democratic party demonstrated the renewed failure of the call for international solidarity of the working masses. In Indonesia, the antagonism of the propertied classes and their political and military exponents towards organized labour did not diminish. The burgeoning agitation for radical reform from below was met with persistent and vehement resistance from

the establishment. The hostile treatment of this progressive current was expressed through lack of sufficient social support, both in the late colonial era, during the freedom struggle and in the years that followed. The memory of fierce suppression of labour activism in the past led to anti-left policies, which continued to leave their mark on Indonesia's postcolonial statecraft. The extermination of the communist ideology and its cadre as well as massive following had its legacy in late colonial policies which responded to the call for freedom with wiping out voices of subversion for the sake of the argument dressed up as Bolshevik agitation. During the cold war this heinous imprint of the past would degenerate into the terrible massacre of 1965.

In spite of the imposition of military dictatorship, good relations between Indonesia and the Netherlands were restored. Again, big business had taken the initiative (Taselaar 1998: 513).While lobbying for the restoration of colonial rule, large scale enterprises with Royal Shell leading the pack hedged their bets by covertly paying for the cost of an attempted coup d'état to wage war as well as making backdoor deals with Indonesia's military forcers to allow them doing business as usual (Metze 2023: 222). However, the former ruler still failed to formally recognize the independence declared in 1945. Only during a visit to Indonesia sixty years later, did the Dutch minister of foreign affairs admit that the Netherlands had been on the wrong side of history. But formal acknowledgement that political freedom was gained in 1945 had to wait until as late as 2023.

The people of Indonesia paid an extraordinarily high price for ending colonialism. The hard-boiled Dutch negotiators of the end-of-war settlement inflicted not only payment of a huge indemnity on their Indonesian counterparts, but also pressed for other major financial advantages to be granted to large-scale capitalist business still headquartered in the Netherlands. Split into annual transfers, this flow of cash from its former colony – larger than the aid which the Netherlands, as an ally of the United States, received under the Marshall Plan – enabled the government to put aside funding to build up the welfare state. It would not be misplaced to suggest that the impoverished Indonesian proletariat was a main donor, contributing to the expenditure for the introduction of an old age pension scheme and other social care stipends for the Dutch working classes.

Finally, the cost involved in the onerous finish to colonial rule cannot be expressed only in financial terms. Annual rituals are held in both Indonesia and the Netherlands to commemorate the conflict-ridden separation of the two countries. On the Dutch side, admitting guilt for systematically

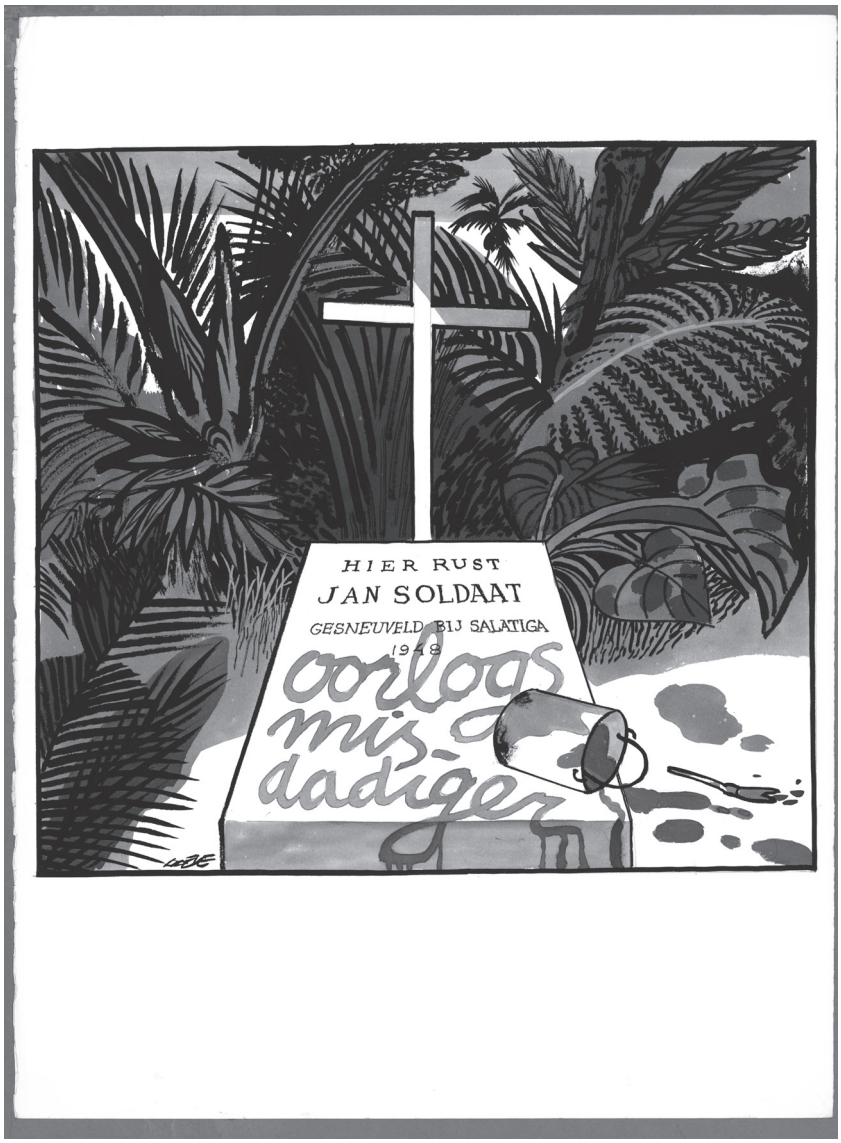

Figure 16.1. The Dutch GI Joe – Jan Soldaat – was accused of having committed war crimes. Tenaciously denied by veterans, a spate of investigations has produced solid evidence of 'excessive violence' as such practices were scaled down in official jargon. Jan Soldaat, on the cover of *Elsevier* 25 January 1969. Source: Eppo Doeve/IISG.

committed war crimes became a major political headache. Confronted in the last half-a-century with increasing factual evidence, it was impossible to avoid public questions about these violations and their perpetrators. Three state-funded academic institutes of history were commissioned to launch

a large-scale research project to investigate published and unpublished accounts from both sides and their partisan stakeholders registering the violence and their malpractices. The consistent political argument that since no war was fought – police action was used to quell the revolt – the case for war crimes would have to be declared null and void, lost its relevance. But in the public presentation of the research findings no mention was made of war crimes. This ominous wording was omitted and downgraded to extreme violence, affirming that its large-scale and systematic practice was ignored, tolerated and legitimated not only by the military command but also by the Dutch government (Limpach 2016: 755-69).The reluctance shown to use war criminality as the politically appropriate verdict (Swirc 2022) demonstrates the linkage that throughout the long episode of colonial history has existed between oblique reporting on the exercise of wanton violence in the overseas domains and a stoic refusal of homeland politics owing up to this reign of vicious suppression. The intertwined fabrication also shows that highlighting events on the stage in Indonesia up to and including decolonization has always been perceived and framed through a Dutch lens. The same one-sided bent endured in the postcolonial decades which saw a marked disinterest of both the political class and public opinion in the Netherlands on how the colonial past would shape the further course of Indonesia's destiny.

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Part V

Development Aid as the Postcolonial Codex of Globalized Capitalism

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13 Spreading Dutch Welfarism in the Global South

> In many Latin American, South Asian, and Middle Eastern countries, labor laws establish onerous job security regulations, rendering hiring decisions practically irreversible; and the system of worker representation and dispute resolution is subject to often unpredictable government decisionmaking, adding uncertainty to firms' estimates of future labor costs.
>
> – World Bank, Workers in an Integrating World: World Development Report 1995 (1995: 34)

The falling tide of development politics

As no other Dutch politician, Jan Pronk has been the lodestar of development politics in the Netherlands. He was schooled in the academic side of his career as a junior member of Jan Tinbergen's staff at the then Netherlands Economic School in Rotterdam. The social activism which drove him found release in the Third World movement during the 1960s. Thus equipped he turned to fulltime politics as member of parliament for the Labour Party in the early 1970s and soon became minister charged with the portfolio of development policies. The combination of theory and practice has been a major mark of his professionalism. As a Keynesian economist on the left side of the spectrum he made planning the hallmark of his policies but its blueprints had to be adjusted and compromised in the light of the numerous hitches and switches which he encountered both at the national and international level. While Pronk is eager to point out what needs to be done and endeavours to be the first one to report on how to convert new insights into concrete policies, the disruptions which are bound to happen in this trajectory often beyond hands-on control have remained understated in his performance.

This observation precedes my review of the book which he published in 1994, *De kritische grens. Beschouwingen over tweespalt en orde* (The critical limit: Reflections on discord and order), a collection of essays authored between 1983 and 1993. His account spells out the reappraisal of developmentalism taking place during this decade and discusses the altered landscape from a social-democratic perspective. Though overlap and repetition are difficult to avoid, the format of a book has enabled him to describe and analyse pivotal changes in the politics of development and to digest the

outcome of this exercise from his own *parti pris*. The first chapter summarizes the main features which shaped the short twentieth century lasting from 1919 to 1980: the rise of a global order, the fabrication of a future breaking through tradition and stagnancy; the dominance of capital and technology over labour and nature; the pledge of a better existence for humankind at large framed in the nation state to be instituted on the basis of democratic rules and rights. But the gains yielded have eroded in the context of growing international discord during the 1990s. While national borders were in the recent past the lines of demarcation – culminating in the North-South divide which used to prevail in the early stage of globalization, another contrast has come to the fore which is manifest within the folds of each and every society. It is a divide rooted and reinforced in economic inequality, but the call to affirm inclusion of the autochthonous majority is accompanied by the exclusion and discrimination of alien outsiders. Underlying this cleavage is a fundamentalist mindset of a nationalistic, ethnic, religious or cultural origin which blocks the passage to an open, tolerant and egalitarian society. How can advancement be realized? Minimally by preventing the emergence of an underclass as a social and global contingent. Given the contrarian trend noticed, this objective seems difficult to attain.

A global public sector

Pronk concludes that the development policy which was meant to end created backwardness and dependency of the Third World has failed. The promise to transfer 1 per cent of the gross domestic product from the rich and industrial arenas to the impoverished parts of the world has not materialized. Interaction on an equal footing has been even less avowed. The many rounds of negotiations conducted in the successive development decades have achieved precious little in redressing the skewed North-South balance. The disjointed international economic order which came into existence as a product of the colonial era close to the middle of the twentieth century has continued to diverge. The spiralling of inequity is neither proportionate nor just. It has resulted in a huge waste of scarce resources and progressive underutilization of labour. In his deliberations on these issues, Pronk examines the growing doubts about the appeal or plausibility of planned construction of the economy and society. Part of the social-democratic legacy giving rise to the welfare state are the scenarios which both before and after World War II paved the way to a brighter future, in the Netherlands exemplified by the Plan for Labour (1935), the Road to

Freedom (1951) and On the Quality of Existence (1963). Still, these political documents have never been operationalized in manuals for the manufacture of a new social order and even less so at the transnational level. This helps to explain why designated policies for the decolonized countries, as, for instance, the Strategy for the First Development Decade (1961-70) drafted by Jan Tinbergen, was duly discussed but not at all acted upon. Planning as such became increasingly discredited both within and beyond the nation state.

Next to inadequate attempts to check on the executive frame which led to a reification of bureaucratic power, Pronk also criticizes the lack of consensus on values and goals as well as the hollowing out of democratic delegation and participation. Consequently, statism has lost both in significance and credence and has been replaced by boundless reliance on market forces. Flexibilization of employment together with structural adjustment to reduce expenditure on social care and protection are tools of the arsenal with which the doctrine of neoliberalism has become the mainstay of economic and social policies. While Pronk concedes that a reigning in of state dominance is advisable to a certain extent, he is sceptical on the rapidity and extremity with which the hidden hand of the market has been given free play. The reborn primacy of neoclassical economics, he persuasively argues, is in the absence of a reasonable spread of income, power and knowledge a disastrous recipe as it spills over in progressive inequality and injustice. His plea for international political and economic statecraft – 'there is no alternative' – is expressed in a later chapter in the desirability of a global public sector. In his rejection of the propagated ideal for small public authority operating with a severely constrained budget, he elaborates on the crucial role which governments have played in achieving material and immaterial progress. This is not merely pertaining to the historical record of welfarism in Europe but also of trusted allies of the 'free West' such as Japan and the first generation of Asian 'tigers', i.e. Taiwan, South Korea and Singapore.

The downfall of the Third World

Many latter-day accounts on developmentalism lack historical depth. Emphasis only on policies announced in the second half of the twentieth century overstate not only the exceptionality of this brief time span – a drawback of which Pronk cannot be found guilty – but also misconceives the longer term transformation of the global constellation. Paying attention to the worldwide enmeshment in a historical context would contradict the received wisdom that the economic crisis in the 1930s remained restricted to the Western

countries and that a globalized recession did not occur earlier than half a century later on. Pronk's collected essays radiate a mood of looming crisis pervaded by deception and failure. His tone of pessimism is justified but does not properly take into account genuine advancement made in several of the developing economies, those in Asia, in particular. For sure, their achievements have to a large extent remained stuck among the privileged segments of society. But despite this highly unequal divide of the stakes, the number of people much to somewhat better off than before should not be underestimated. It is an appraisal noticeable among the middle ranks of society which lower down in the class hierarchy has whetted the appetite for better days ahead. Ironically, the conclusion that the gains made are due to aid supplied from the West might turn out to be a disputable notion. The opposite is actually time and again the case, since rather than to allow latecomers to catch up in beneficial collaboration, the struggle to achieve progress tends to be fought in competition with the much better-off contingents of humanity accustomed to lay claim to the spoils of global development.

Pronk's book evokes a world view which is inspired by a Western-prone weft. Correctly so in the sense that his point of departure is the ongoing hegemony of the North Atlantic world. However, he is astutely aware of the transferences occurring in the balance of economic and political power as exemplified by the collapse of the socialist regimes in Eastern Europe, the impoverishment of large parts of Africa and the catching-up drive in continental Asia. The Third World as a short-term phase of the postcolonial era has faded away and its collapse owes much to the implosion of the Second World. The contestation in the geopolitical force field, which reflects a much longer trend of emerging versus declining imperialist power mongering is only mentioned in passing, summed up in the chapter which elaborates on a memorandum *A World of Difference* which Pronk drafted in 1990. He does not elaborate on the splitting of our planet in separated blocs and their temporary borders, which illustrates the diminished room for manoeuvre ascribed by him to the nation state as the main unit of analysis. The same idea also finds expression in his perception that the primacy of politics above economics has ended in the 1980s. Their turnaround priority, he argues, is mainly caused by the transnationalization of capitalism which broke free from étatist control.

Discord in worldwide interdependence

Without trivializing the accelerated gap between 'rich' and 'poor' countries, Pronk emphasizes in his examination the accelerated trend of polarization

which is omnipresent where the market mechanism prevails. The levelling down of global inequity was ranked at the top of the designated New International Economic Order. It was a goal which has never found favour among proponents representing the already well-endowed side of humanity and became relegated as a remote ideal in the widely accepted credo which considers inequality to be the engine for the gratification of unbridled wants. Who would want to hear that higher up in this race to ever more the maxim that enough is enough should have been acted upon long ago? The urgent call for limits to growth, let alone for compliance with de-growth, finds few recipients in the realms where prosperity abounds. The incantation that an equitable sharing of the resources needed for global welfarism can no longer be postponed do not impress all those hunting for the accumulation of wealth and its power, turning their back to the immiseration caused by their conduct. The critique Pronk advocates is focused on these dynamics of capitalism.

His anxiety concerns the dire consequences of progressive trend of divergence. Harnessing nature which was preconditional to redemption from stagnation and poverty has escalated into environmental plunder and destruction by stakeholders of an exploitative modus operandi that concedes no other trust than instant and gross gains. Pronk does not dwell on the physical threat exceeding from a transgression of sustainable ecological boundaries. In Dutch politics warnings against untamed economic growth were already signalled but not heeded in the early 1980s and Pronk was party to that signal. He holds forth in his essays that discord is of a global magnitude with an all-over trend of more instead of less indigence. Certainly, poverty is a timeless predicament but the predatory capitalism currently raging means that succour from indigence is more difficult to find than in the past when the capital-labour balance was less skewed than it is now.

The trickle down recipe filtering through waged work and income to the lower classes was supposed to gradually improve living standards for all and sundry. It turned out to be wishful thinking and has been acutely exposed as a myth. Due to technological innovation – after mechanization, automation, computerization and robotization – capital tends to replace labour not only in industry but also in all other branches of the economy leading to growing un- or underemployment. Poverty boiling over in destitution has become a fixed condition at the bottom of the heap. Social care benefits, if at all provided, are targeted on small and better-off sections of the workforce but do not reach the most vulnerable classes down below. Locked up in chronic deprivation it is a plight addressed as exclusion. It is a key term coined in

France and launched by Jacques Delors in his failed attempt to add a social paragraph to Europe's economic treaty.

In Pronk's perception exclusion surpasses exploitation in its impact:

> All those who are marginalized because neither their labour power nor their purchasing power is required, are cut off from the market and have become redundant to demand. They are not even exploited and in their dispossessed state have nothing of value to share and team up with fellow sufferers to seek collective access to the market and build up bargaining power. (1994: 180-81)

Massive poverty such as revealed in today's world is not the result of an autonomous process of social differentiation but effectuated by policies strenuously executed. This is not an incidental observation but one which is repeated again and again. Rather than proclaiming this overpowering social problem at the apex of political urgency, the misery generated all around seems to increase the glamour of the conspicuous comfort enjoyed by the privileged part of humanity. Rousseau's motto which is the start of this book dates back to the mid-eighteenth century when Europe was still a pre-industrial and pre-capitalist society. Taking stock of the similarities which are of an universal character should not prompt us to ignore major variations in the quantity and quality of the existential deficit. While in the ultra-poor countries half or an even higher share of the population are unable to satisfy their basic needs, in the countries declared as rich are inhabited by a very sizable minority, in the USA estimated at two-fifths and in Western Europe about a quarter of all households, which are unable to make ends meet. Aside from differences in the magnitude of poverty, the concept of deficiency itself needs to be comprehended in relative and relational contextualization. Pronk frames this contrast in scale and intensity in a structural binary which prevails worldwide.

The idea of a societal polarity is not new and has its origin in theories of social-cultural or political-economic dualism. The splitting up of a multi-stratified spectrum in just two parts has been criticized as unduly simplistic. Zooming in on its polar ends, Pronk may have overstated the rigidity of his dualistic model. Mobility both down and up can also be discerned in the lower ranges of the social pyramid and more factual evidence is needed to surmise that accumulation versus dispossession are consistently as well as congruently intertwined, ending in a homogenization of the residual lot. Another reservation I have concerns the notion that people deprived from access to viable means of subsistence are prone to fall back on identities of

kin, creed, caste or tribe in a communal and closed mindset which prevents engagement in wider bonds of affiliation. Exclusion does indeed lead to isolation and alienation but it is a marginality depleted from ideological fervour. Instead of being resorted to by the lot stuck in residual immiseration, such a fundamentalist mindset seems to be more peculiar to the milieu of the petty and well-established bourgeoisie.

These are minor comments which do not distract from my positive appraisal of Pronk's argumentation. His exposition allows us to carefully put on record the intricate composure that should be attached to the poverty concept. The imagery that in the process of globalization the world can be recast as a village with separate quarters leaves much to be desired when the spread of urban and rural slums and their dwellers remain unmapped as well as uninspected in this make-believe landscape. Social Darwinism has towards the end of the twentieth century come back with a vengeance. There is once more no dearth of voices insisting that the pauperized underclass at the bottom of pile consists of an inferior bunch failing to comply with the dictum of self-provisioning, portrayed as a redundant surplus which frustrates those on the good side of the fence in their drive to move higher up in the social scale. It is a mentality bereft from compassion for latecomers, backbenchers and misfits. Although such opinions are commonly expressed where the advance of capitalism has remained thoroughly untamed, it is by no means absent where the struggle for emancipation has been waged with some measure of success in the past.

A political *parti pris*

A feature which I strongly endorse in the writings of Pronk is his refusal to retreat in the technocratic idiom which makes much of the literature on development economics unpalatable for a readership versed in qualification over and above the standard method of quantification He is adamant to go along with a dominating trend which is apt to discuss development in non-politicized jargon and operationalized as an economic subject which had best be left to professionals of this expertise. In his firm rejection to do so, Pronk makes clear that the selection of goals and the means to realize them are based on political choice. It is an aspiration which, in order to be accomplished, requires to be embedded in a broader policy frame which takes social and cultural propensities into account. Probing into the economic merits of policies without taking into account their unequal spread and plain disregard for a brighter future of the classes

steeped in poverty is counterproductive not only in a political sense. To sideline these masses adds up to a huge underutilization of productive cum consumptive potentiality. It is a rationale which does not halt at the borders of the Dutch welfare state. Pronk has a more encompassing mandate as his charge is a global task which goes far beyond the commitment of homeland politicians.

Why does it remain unattractive to allow the marginalized crowds to become part and parcel of market operations? After all, a badly needed improvement of their low-value labour power and inferior living standard would stimulate growth of production and consumption. According to Pronk, however, this economic compulsion does not operate because the bargaining power of the non-poor is so overwhelming that incentives to deepen the reach of the market are bound to fail. This is a debatable issue in my view because it implies that the efficacy of the market is accepted as the organizing principle for arranging the fabric of society, which amounts to a concession that grounds can and should be contested on non-economistic grounds. The cutting edge of politics is of prime importance in Pronk's unwillingness to abide with exclusion. Giving priority to this adage is definitely not inspired by anxiety for outbreak of a revolution against the established order or, on the opposite side, passive acquiescence in a market dictate which unconditionally subjects labour to capital. No, the crucial problem is the absence of verifiable indications that 'the wretched of the earth' are on the verge of collectively rising in revolt. The more mundane reaction appears to be that growing numbers of desperate victims of unbearable deprivation try to escape and attempt to reach one of the safe havens of the world. Bridging distance as a consequence of modern communication and transport has facilitated departure though, of course, without safeguarding secure and cost-free passage to a better destiny.

The habitus of greed which wards off fair and just distribution of wealth within national borders also sets up barriers against flocks of refugees in search of a better existence away from distress. Dutch prime ministers have again and again warned that the influx of uncalled for outsiders – understood as people of non-Western identity – has reached a critical limit. Their admission or not should be based on a mix of forbidding and humanitarian criteria. In bureaucratic handling this means that the latter yardstick remains superseded by the former one. Pronk thoroughly disagrees with this standing practice and not only because extradition does not square with the free market gospel. He points out the arrival of other ethnicities in the past brought improvement and innovation. Why would that be different in the future? With such statements on the usefulness of minorities Pronk

drew fire in the circuit of majoritarian inclined politicians. He was publicly told to shut up also by the chairperson of his own party.

Where is his own critical limit bound to end? The denial of basic rights of existence to a substantial part of humanity in contrast to putting a premium on further privileging the frontrunners of individualized welfare. Transnational solidarity is his singular impetus. Exclusion also detracts people who happen to be on the secure and safe side of life from the decency and dignity which they claim for themselves. The critical limit is overstepped if not poverty but poor people are seen as a problem beyond solution. When Gunnar Myrdal published his voluminous *Asian Drama: An Enquiry into the Poverty of Nations* (1968), he rendered an opinion (not his own) that the sliding of this huge continent below the sea level would be greeted as an immense disaster but that the shock felt in the better-off quarters of the world might soon be replaced by a feeling of relief.

Pronk draws the line of his critical limit from a social-democratic world view. The initial slogan of transnational solidarity has not really shaped in a concise programme. Its rhetoric doxa is badly in need of revision. His operationalization remains sketchy and mainly leans on Ralf Dahrendorf's formulation: an 'open society', succinctly described as aligning in confrontation with reigning power, intolerance, discrimination and from the opposite perspective redemption of an underclass; an egalitarian social structure; forbearance of dissenting norms and values and culminating in the idea that such a vista on the footing of equity is of civilizational value. Does this phraseology wind up in a plan of action from which the 'surplus' and written off contingents of humankind can draw hope for their emancipation? Pronk is too shy to expound further.

Exclusion can also be differently interpreted than he does by tracing the manner in which the owners of capital try to remain scot-free from social intercourse and control beyond their own ranks. It is an escape which coincides with the accelerated income inequality resulting in wealth which remains increasingly exempt from national and international regimes of taxation. The widening base for state-levied duties, which in a historical process reflects labour's increased bargaining power vis-à-vis capital, slowed down to become converted in a narrowing trend. The push for a turnaround was promoted with the fairy tale that unburdened capital accumulation would boost both economic growth and employment generation. This is an illusionary line of reasoning which ascribes to capitalism a much exaggerated rationality which understates its speculative and wasteful features. The shrinking space for politics and policies of the national state has failed to trigger an strengthening of public and democratic control at levels higher up. Pronk points out that

the international monetary order has become far greater privatized than initially intended and questions multinational concentrations of financial power. Highlighting this stage of corporate capitalism corroborates with the insight that the core tenets of social-democratic vintage are no match for effective counter-play against the gestalt of global capitalism. The code drafted in the 1970s which bound multinationals to fair trade was never practiced and the surmise that international trade unionism would be able to restrain capitalist free play has turned out to be a delusion.

Veritable and verifiable engagement with global discord requires more radical reforms than were placed on the agenda of development policies. The spirit of avarice, captivated in the credo of the insatiability of wants directing *Homo economicus* was, when it conquered space for being practiced, a major vector for a fundamental breakthrough in the forces of production to a higher plane. For the sake of sustainable development the quest for ever more needs to be reined in by audacious austerity. Judicious moderation in the extraction of natural resources is adamant both for the well-being of future generations and for granting the right to a better existence for all those who remain denied from basic decency and dignity. The lustrous way of life led by an overprivileged but minority segment of the human species cannot be the benchmark for equitable spread Setting a ceiling on wayward wants and conspicuous consumption will not be feasible without a toning down of the luxury and comforts which allows a creamy layer to detach themselves and back out from mainstream society.

A democratic political constellation is rooted in a national order founded on equivalent shares of the yield from socio-economic activity comprised in the structure and dynamics of society. The balance reached mirrors a trajectory of competition and strife which gradually managed to tame the free interplay of market forces by state-induced intervention. It would be an illusion to suggest that further progress of democracy or even consolidation where it has become anchored will be a dominating trend in a world which is embroiled in a absurdly tilted distribution of wealth. Cornering the sources of welfare humans require for bearable existence during the high tide of imperialism spiralled to climax in an appropriation-dispossession mechanism. Industrial capitalism as the driving engine of accelerated globalization was in its initial stage wont to tolerate democratic infringement on its pursuits though for a short time span only. It is a mode of production which seems to thrive in political regimes which grimly constraint labour but condones limitless freedom of capital to operate. Flight of the economy from public control at the level of the nation state urgently needs transnational redress in order to safeguard civil rights in countries which did not bother

to provide space for raising the social question but not much less so in countries which took care to protect labour in a former era of development.

The demise of developmentalism

The crisis which agonizes Pronk is the demise of developmentalism in a slow process of deceleration in the final quarter of the twentieth century. Will the dismantling of the vestiges built up – authority, institutes, disciplines, training and research – sweep aside the expertise gained? The prospect is similar to the one faced by the last generation of colonial officialdom who declared to have been untimely decommissioned from their mission to bring progress. Probably, as also happened then, many among this motley crowd of well-wishers, ranging from field staff to writing table pundits, will find other and useful employment. But the underlying premise that they are the harbingers and fabricators of Western achievements cannot any longer be the banner of their trade. Their role as poster boys or girls of showing the pathway to meritorious Westernization has turned out to be a mirage.

A recent publication assessing the quantity and quality of Dutch aid amply demonstrates its lack of effective impact in the main countries on which this financial and professional aid has been spent (Van Lieshout et al. 2010). The criticism addresses the tardiness and sluggishness of policy headquarters and its accounting mentality. The target group approach which was assumed to reduce poverty failed to take off and went accompanied by a meddling which smacked of neocolonial interference. Assessment criteria were constantly revised which complicated figuring out the effects of action taken and money wasted. All this was grist to the mill for a diverse mixture of opponents to developmentalism. Pronk himself more even-handedly observed that the aid provided has reached beneficiaries only to some extent and for some time, unable to bring progress and improvement where it was badly required. Behind a façade of generosity the self-interest of the donors has remained barely hidden.

Pronk's ambition to be at the top of the league of donor countries and set the tone for daring policies did not find favour with Dutch real politics. His successors at the helm fell in line with the tardy and lukewarm approach to developmentalism. The budget allotted to this ministry was increasingly spent not on the core business but on collateral commitments, such as the merger of former Second World countries into the European Economic Community, dealing with the rapidly growing influx of refugees and emergency aid to cope with natural disasters. It was a leaking away initially registered

as adulteration but not any longer in the political switch which followed to a no-nonsense style of governance. The accelerated pace of globalization did not create growing but shrinking space for the department charged with this portfolio. Pronk, as its main policymaker for many years, was habituated to work with a clear and undiluted agenda and was, in the changing set of political coalitions, diverted to other postings and thus lost control over what had been his prime ambit. Taking stock of war-caused suffering on the Balkans and in Sudan, he gave vent to his shocked appraisal and his final essay – entitled 'The Lust for Hate' – speaks of a shattered world view.

How to shape a better future? Drawing the conclusion from a national and transnational career, Pronk rejects muddling through with marginal moderation and piecemeal reforms which does not meet the head-on threat to human and planetary survival. His clarion call is for a fundamental change of norms and values, a new set of policy objectives and institutions. When progressive inequality is indeed the heart of the matter, developmentalism cannot but include restructuring the fabric and drift of 'developed' society which is founded on a race for ever more and better. Is Pronk's dissenting voice likely to contribute to this unexplored mission? Apparently this does not depend on his own drive but first and foremost on the willingness of mainstream politics to allow him to take part in this endeavour.

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14 Development Aid Abandoned, Mission Achieved

Ill fares the land, to hastening ill a prey, Where wealth accumulates and men decay.
– Oliver Goldsmith, *The Deserted Village, a Poem* (1770)

Western aid policies under scrutiny

The Dutch have been at the forefront of the development aid business for a long time. Willing to spend close to 1 per cent of their GDP on development assistance – nearly €5 billion in 2010 – they belonged to a small league of countries addressing the gap between rich and poor nation states which had become manifest by the middle of the twentieth century. The same moral grounds the Dutch advanced to justify colonialism as a civilizing mission served as inspiration for the upliftment of peoples who had liberated themselves from Western domination. Right from the start, this worthy pursuit was nevertheless coloured by the more mundane motives of political and economic self-interest. In addition, a general mood of benevolence existed which had its origins in the history of the emancipation of the working class. That consciousness was tapped into by a resurging social activism calling for solidarity with the underprivileged masses of humanity. With the strong support of both the social and Christian democratic parties, development aid has figured high on the political agenda in the second half of the twentieth century. Having its basis in civil society, the Third World movement in the Netherlands gave rise to a large number of non-government organizations (NGOs) which came to rely on the state for funding their activities at home and abroad.

In spite of a constant spate of feel-good stories intended to demonstrate that the money donated was used efficiently as well as effectively, the once-successful lobby of aid protagonists gradually lost ground and came to face a swelling tide of scepticism. Arguing from the donor perspective, critics at home could quote sources and voices in receiving countries denying the benign impact of Dutch largesse. And the spectacle is there to see for all: several countries that have been well endowed have not made much progress – Suriname, some African states – while other countries that received less or nothing at all – in particular, China, but also India which, under the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) government decided to foreclose

Dutch funding – have leaped ahead. Globalization has accelerated and contributed to the divergent or contradictory trends that can be discerned. The earlier schism between developed and developing countries has ceased to function as a clear handle in establishing where, on whom, or on what the aid budget is best spent. The indicators on both sides of the divide can no longer be standardized in a neatly demarcated and consistent classification scheme. What to make, for instance, of the statistics that one out of ten children up to the age of seventeen in the Netherlands grows up in poverty? The plight of these youngsters living in a welfare state bears no comparison to the percentage of their peers in India who face much starker deprivation – half of them undernourished and underweight. Nevertheless, the news does not augur well for highlighting the misery in faraway lands. Of great significance, and adding to the rapidly changing scenario, is the political backlash against globalization taking place in Europe – and emphatically so in the Netherlands. A rightist populist movement has sprung up to which a sizable segment of the Dutch electorate has turned in the hope of a secure future, ever more prosperity and dreams of recovering a national identity that never existed. Speaking out against the grave danger in our midst – the presence of non-Western minorities in general, and Muslims, in particular – the Partij voor de Vrijheid (Party for Freedom, PVV), led by the maverick Geert Wilders, has campaigned for doing away with development aid and spending the budget on more respectable causes in Dutch society. Co-opted by conservative parties to gain a majority in parliament and eager to bring about a swing to the right, the PVV has been accepted as a partner in the ruling coalition.

The enigma of development and how to measure it

It is in this setting that the Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid (Scientific Council for Government Policy, WRR), an advisory body to the Dutch government, and politically well connected, has endeavoured to draft a report which is essentially an assessment of Dutch development policy in the past decades. The stock-taking exercise by an agency lacking an established record of expertise in this particular field has led to a draconic overhaul of things as they are. Firstly, monitoring what has been done in practice is contextualized by raising questions about what development is all about and secondly, by framing the outline of a new agenda. Less pretension, more ambition is the point of departure on what to do next. The plea is for a fundamental change in course, away from poverty alleviation as

the main objective and returning to an approach firmly aimed at economic growth spearheaded by middle-class stakeholders, away from prioritizing healthcare and education as well as drastically cutting down on NGO funding. The challenging task of implementing the new policy agenda is to be entrusted to a professional organization staffed by experts with a mandate to streamline, select and handle the core business of the restyled aid effort. The Dutch edition was published early last year and appeared at a moment when public opinion had woken up to the idea that globalization, rather than opening new markets for Dutch commodities and services, might hamper further domestic growth in jobs and incomes – or could even be the start of a reverse trend resulting in a decline in wealth. The global financial crisis of the end of 2008 onwards has contributed to a loss of faith in a better future. In a fascinating television broadcast Dutch corporate leaders told their audience in plain language that wage levels were too high, the work day and life too short and social security too costly in a highly competitive world where a race to the bottom has driven down the cost of labour to the lowest possible level. Trimming the welfare state has been taking place at a rapid pace but a new directory was also required on how to deal with the problem of global development. The WRR report fitted the bill, more so since it contains a large number of specific recommendations on the substance and shape of a new trajectory.

The present review is of the just-published English translation, *Less Pretension, More Ambition* (Van Lieshout et al. 2010). Unfortunately, most sections discussing particular features of the Dutch approach and record which were elaborated on in the original report have been omitted from the English edition. Such as the detail that among the first batch of Dutch development experts, many were returned colonial officials in search of jobs considered suitable to their expertise. Or the concrete proposal to charge a professional agency (a coordinating development organization called NLAID) with the important task of implementation instead of routing it through a sub-ministry which was set up for this purpose but whose staff is not really up to the job. If retained, instead of disappearing in the dustbin of information on Dutch mores and practices regarding developmentalism, we would have had a clear-cut case study and not a publication with broad but not very in-depth coverage. One in which the international debate is the main theme while the objectives, execution and impact of the Dutch policy remain understated. That the panel has done its homework cannot be disputed. They interviewed nearly 500 academics, practitioners, policymakers and politicians and took time off touring around the developing world to acquaint themselves with 'the field'. All said and done, that encounter, which

for most of them was apparently a first, does not seem to have amounted to much because their study has the imprint of a desk study.

What then are the main findings and suggestions? First, of course, is the issue of what development is all about. The definition, adhered to as a guideline throughout the text, does not strike the informed reader as being a very considered one: *the deliberate acceleration of modernization*.[1] Further operationalized as by and large replicating the Western path of societal transformation in which the distinct spheres – economy, politics, governance and social fabric – albeit getting dissociated, remain interdependent in their dynamics. Too Eurocentric to accept as a universal route? The authors do not think so: '[T]here has been growing resistance to an interpretation that implies that the Western model is the best, and the above formulation comes close to doing just that. However, closer examination reveals that there are not many radical alternatives' (Van Lieshout et al. 2010: 49).

Following in the footsteps of what has been achieved in the West since the nineteenth century thus becomes the yardstick for measuring the progress made by the Rest. It is the kind of wisdom that flies in the face of what is going on in different parts of the world: transformation yes, but most definitely not in the Western mould. Also lacking in the flat and managerial manual is the explicit acknowledgement of the emancipatory dimension of development as embetterment, release from the shackles of dependency and subalternity, redemption from dearth and inequity and liberation from constraints which preclude optimizing behaviour, culminating in a growing dignity of the human condition. In line with the absence of this normative quality is the report's insistence that focusing on poverty, as highlighted in the Millennium Development Goals, detracts attention away from structural changes and the need to reform agriculture together with other productive sectors. Instead of tackling poverty head-on, a more effective strategy would be to invest

> in an emerging middle class which can function as a motor for economic growth and employment. What is more, the poor benefit from the rule of law, property rights, taxes for financing public goods such as education, social provisions and healthcare and more accountable government as defended by the middle class. (Van Lieshout et al. 2010: 108)

This statement expresses a mindset that appears to have shut off the authors from the vast body of literature disputing these convenient platitudes.

1 For a similar critique, see Pronk (2010).

Again, successful development takes place when dutifully copying how it came about in the West, i.e. from the top down. It is with this historic lesson in mind on how progress does and should proceed that the report warns against prioritizing poverty reduction on the policy agenda and directly focusing on the poorest as the favoured beneficiaries of aid. The critique also rejects a concern with social sectors and allocating funds to what are depicted as palliatives such as safe drinking water, sanitation, education or even healthcare. No, no, no – that misguided generosity has to stop in accordance with the elementary dictum of growth first and redistribution later. We are told that turning the sequence around is starting at the wrong side of the development spectre.

Only when growth goes up poverty comes down

The Dutch policy, the report argues, has unwisely foregrounded poverty alleviation in the past few decades over investment in economic production and infrastructure. A more positive outcome would have materialized if, instead of caring for the poor, their sense of self-reliance had been reinforced. But poverty, at least judging from my research experience, by definition entails a lack of resources – and often a lack of all wherewithal. What does it then mean to urge people living in deep misery to bounce back and find strength in their own wit? Those who fail to do so are then blamed for lacking the willpower and perseverance to uplift themselves and stand accused of mental defects which cast doubt on their capacity ever to become self-reliant. The report duly acknowledges that initially, in the 1950s and 1960s, economic growth was clearly the reference point in spending the budget. However, my reading of the change in policies that came about is that the strategy of banking on the better-off classes fell out of favour once it became clear that the poor did not share in the growth benefits produced by Dutch aid. Indeed, the authors concede that the trickle down mechanism is flawed in the sense that the seeping through of the accumulated surplus to the bottom classes, in other words the (re)distribution of wealth, is by no means standard practice and may actually come late in the day or sometimes not at all. It is a casual comment made only in passing. No words are spent on the perpetuation of poverty under those circumstances. Neither has it led to a rephrasing of the growth scenario, nor to a reconsideration of the facile statement that the poor also stand to benefit from the rule of law, property rights, taxes for public goods and a wide range of provisions all introduced to serve middle-class interests.

The report is quite complacent on the progress made overall. Welfare indicators, it says, present a predominantly positive picture. The percentage of mankind living in deprivation has indeed gone down. That positive trend, however, pertains mainly to China which has managed to raise large segments of its population above the poverty line in the last quarter of a century. When I beg to disagree with an undue generalization on poverty alleviation for the world at large, it is because the part of humankind forced to live on less than US$1.25 per day has substantially increased in the same period. Equally disputable is the notion that poverty may reflect inadequate market incorporation. For people in dire straits, the yardstick of hardly one dollar per day is said to be meaningless since they 'do not even participate in a market economy and try to live off a small plot of land, possibly supplemented with a limited exchange of goods' (Van Lieshout et al. 2010: 93). This statement indicates once again a total absence of familiarity with the milieu in which the poor live. The limitations they face in market transactions (labour, commodity, credit) result from their lack of physical as well as all forms of social capital with which to shop around. At stake here is not foot-dragging participation on the supply side but deliberate exclusion from market operations on the demand side.

My criticism of the WRR line of thought concerns the nature of the political economy prescribed. Save some minor reservations, the message is that poverty declines when growth increases, a process facilitated by an expanding middle class whose historical role is to generate the surplus and economic space required for the progress of all and sundry. We are told that this is how it happened in the Atlantic basin on the Northern Hemisphere a few generations ago and that precedent becomes the guideline for successful development worldwide. In the new Dutch approach emphasizing self-reliance, the social question – i.e. how to provide a better life for the underprivileged – is something the developing economies have to take care of themselves. Missing in this script is the realization that poverty or impoverishment can be the outcome of the way in which economic growth takes place. The report is rather ambiguous in coming to terms with this disconcerting thought, and the factual evidence advanced in support of the spread of welfare as the dominant trend is contradictory. As, for instance, the suggestion, on the one hand, that in India the distribution of income is more equal (than in China, and that observation is already questionable), while conceding, on the other hand, that inequality in this South Asian country has risen sharply in the wake of economic liberalization since the early 1990s. We are living in an era of predatory capitalism and to understand what that means for the down and out on our planet, more is

required than just saying that poverty is not the problem of those living in affluence.

Informalization of the economy

The authors tend to be biased in the sense of having relied on sources which confirm their preconceived ideas about development as adhering to the course of the earlier transition in the West: middle class first and the large majority later, much later. During their visit to India, they met with members of a national commission who compiled a report on the state of the informal sector.[2] However, the findings of this panel are completely disregarded although they show that in 2005 more than three-quarters of India's population had to make do with an average of less than 20 rupees per day per capita, an amount which led to the classification of these people as poor and vulnerable. In contrast, there is the 'shining India' of the middle classes who gain in prosperity thanks to driving the cost of low-caste labour down to the lowest possible level. As a matter of fact, the WRR report makes no mention at all of informality as the mode of employment of more than 90 per cent of the Indian workforce. It means the absence of regular work, casual instead of permanent jobs, wage payment not on time rate but on piece rate, long, erratic hours of work, appalling conditions of employment, no overhead allowances and social benefits or other labour rights providing protection against adversity, lack of representation and collective agency, and a clear preference by those who hire labour to procure it on the basis of self-employment and a more general insistence on self-reliance to cope with self-reliance to cope with household crises. Accumulation in the higher echelons of the economy is accompanied by large-scale deprivation at the bottom. The informalization of labour is the trajectory of economic growth not only in India but also in China and elsewhere in the developing world. Moreover, informalization should be understood as not only structuring labour relations but also deregulating capital transactions outside the state's orbit (usually written up under the heading of corruption, black money, etc.). Informality spills over into illegality and this denouement transpires also in the sphere of governance (the privatization of public authority, the criminalization of politics). The drive towards informalization is no longer

2 The National Commission has brought out a series of papers on various themes and summed up their substance in a final report. This report as well as the preceding ones are available at: www.nceus.gov.in.

restricted to what used to be called the Third World but has also become highly visible in both the Second and the First World. These dynamics, a case of the West following the Rest rather than the other way around, have been accelerated by the global economic meltdown.

Path-dependent trajectories in bringing about development

The global stage is set for the path of development written up by Karl Polanyi as *The Great Transformation* (1944) which came about within the framework of the nation state. In the first phase of this trajectory, which took place throughout the nineteenth century, the economy in the West became disembedded from society. Those dynamics became manifest in the neoclassical dogma of the time which hailed the free interplay between the market forces of supply and demand. Liberating economic activity from all fetters, the relentless drive towards deregulation, strengthened the power of capital and weakened that of labour. The background to the downward spiral in which Europe's working masses became entrapped was the replacement of agriculture by industry as the primary mode of production. Land-poor and landless segments of the workforce were driven from villages and settled down in towns and cities, a type of mobility which was accompanied by a fundamental shift in work and livelihood. At first sight this seems to be the model on which the Dutch report has built its analysis of parallel development. After all, the exodus from agriculture is a truly global phenomenon reflected in the diminishing percentage of GDP generated by what for countless centuries has been the dominant sector of the economy. However, for a variety of reasons the current transformation in the context of globalization can by no stretch of imagination be portrayed as a repeat of Western development. In the first place, what is absent is a re-embedding of the economy as a result of the strengthened bargaining position of labour vis-à-vis capital. That progress was the outcome of pressure from below due to the increased agency of the working classes expressed in the promotion of collective action, in the assertion of political democracy and the expansion of the public domain under the auspices of the government. This handling of what towards the end of the nineteenth century came to be known as the 'social question' also led the nation state to realign its role in mediating between the interests of labour and capital. A similar reassessment which resulted in a decline in poverty levels is not on today's agenda of the powers that be. In the second place, in the era of globalization the economy has broken free once more from its societal moorings. We

have seen the unfolding of a brutal economic regime, not held in check by public governance at the transnational level. As a matter fact, the impasse in global governance is a major reason for the lack of stability and security in which we live. In the third place, the paradigm from agrarian-rural to industrial-urban is not a helpful model at all for tracing the transformation taking place in the world at large. Many migrants pushed out of their rural habitat fail to establish a permanent foothold wherever they go and have no other option but to remain footloose and circulate back and forth (Breman 2010). Moreover, rather than in industry they end up in the service sector of the economy which provides a wide range of employment niches of last resort. Post-agrarian would therefore be a better label for these societies than suggesting they are industrializing.

Dynamics of divergence

These are some of the reasons which warn against abiding by the recipe of a once-trodden development route presented as the classical course to follow. The manual of informalization is vigorously pushed by the main transnational agencies in favour of privatizing all that is public and propagating a relentless flexibilization of the labour market. In that policy framework informalization has indeed become the global agenda for the subordination of labour to the dictates of capital.[3] These two main factors of production are juxtaposed in a policy frame which condones a progressive maldistribution of the spoils of growth and offers no hope for a more equitable outcome than to wait for the eventual magic of the trickle-down mechanism. In large parts of the Southern Hemisphere development is a differentiating process which needs to be framed within a social class matrix. Shorn of any such comprehension, the purport of the Dutch report seems to be the misconceived notion that sooner or later development will lead to convergence and reduce the distance separating the *haves* from the masses of *have-nots* at the bottom of the heap. Which policies can redress a further widening of the gap between the included versus the excluded segments which are positioned at the polar ends of the global hierarchy? Distribution, the authors of the Dutch report insist, cannot precede growth. But the re-embedding of the economy in the West from the end of the nineteenth century onwards was the beginning of an era which did not redistribute

3 See Breman (2002) for a review essay of the 1995 World Development Report *Workers in an Integrating World* (World Bank 1995).

but produced wealth as the outcome of a process of economic, political, social and cultural democratization. As Tony Judt (2010) eloquently argues in *Ill Fares the Land*, the welfare state, which slowly emerged in Western Europe during the first half of the twentieth century, did not spread around what had earlier been amassed but generated a welfare fund by expanding decent and dignified employment in the public and private sector on the basis of state intervention. The execution of people-friendly politics and policies took place in a democratic framework resulting in a more egalitarian climate all round, committed to dividing up the steady rise in prosperity in a spirit of equity and social justice. The prospects of a return to such a welfare regime, this time no longer at the level of the nation state but in a global setting, are dim and there is very little to be found in the Dutch report paving the way in this direction.

Halting the NGO-ization of the aid packet

While the WRR report proposes a U-turn in development aid spending, away from prioritizing poverty alleviation and what are identified as soft sectors (healthcare and education, in particular), its set of recommendations also affect the role of other stakeholders. Prominent among these are non-governmental organizations eating up a third of the total budget, a sum of €1.5 billion each year. A formidable amount and, as the curt comment observes, not deserved by far by this bunch of do-gooders who have failed to deliver. That conclusion is backed up by various critical issues. The most crucial one being that civil society has proved not to be the panacea for development problems. Well, a universal remedy for all ills is a tall order but who would deny that civil associations, operating as they do between market and state, can play a facilitating role in bringing about change for the better? In its reaction to the WRR report, the ruling coalition has somewhat softened the blow by acknowledging that the NGOs make a meaningful contribution to accelerating the development process, particularly because of the way in which they genuinely try to reach out to the most vulnerable sections in society. This, however, does not negate, also in my opinion, that many Dutch NGOs have fallen sway to the temptation to mediate on behalf of outside interests rather than, as their original mission stated, promoting the interests of those they serve. The micro-finance hype, whereby bank loans are arranged for the poor at a 25 per cent interest rate or even higher, is a case in point. It grew into a major business activity, willingly and royally funded by Dutch civil organizations engaging in the lucrative venture of

public-private partnerships. While the bubble was already bursting in India,[4] a new idea came up from influential well-wishers in the Netherlands, to launch a global banking corporation for the poor. The initiative was warmly welcomed without giving a moment's thought to either the good old pawn shop in the social history of the West or making the connection with the well-known village moneylender in India who until today is a major link in the micro-credit chain, converting formal monetary transactions into informal ones. NGOs have also made themselves vulnerable by buying into the public-private partnership formula, which is promoted by the World Bank, to penetrate the milieu of the underclasses which often remain beyond the purview of the welfare schemes doled out by government agencies. But the most devastating item of critique, unfortunately highlighted only in the original Dutch edition, is that many civil associations have forsaken to fulfil their watchdog role at home – which they publicly boast about – as a direct result of having become subservient to Dutch policies and politics.

The edition under review proudly announces that in October 2010 the new Dutch government decided to use the report as the basis of a thorough modernization of the Netherlands' policy aims.[5] Among other things, this means that the part of the state funding allocated to promote the agency of civil society is drastically reduced by a third. The reaction of NGOs has predictably been one of shock and alarm but their political clout to try and settle for a less dramatic cut seems to have dwindled, as has the public goodwill they have enjoyed for many decades. At the same time, the government does not want to risk a head-on confrontation with what is still an important lobby and has announced its willingness to engage in a social dialogue to keep the NGO circuit co-opted in the new plan of action. It remains to be seen who are going to be identified as partners in this initiative. The capacity of civil associations to reach out to vulnerable people is not an unconditional blessing. This became very clear a short while ago when one of the large NGOs in the Netherlands agreed to fund some features of the Palestinian cause, more specifically in support of the campaign demanding that the occupying force abide by international law

4 The racket has caused uproar and is well documented in the media. Since I was at the moment engaged in anthropological fieldwork in rural Gujarat, I did not have immediate access to the large body of information published on the scam, which has been going on for years. For a good example, see *Economic Times* (2011).

5 The Dutch cabinet has confirmed its generally positive reaction to the WRR report in a note sent to parliament on 24 January 2011. See: http://www.thebrokeronline.eu/Online-discussions/Towards-a-global-development-strategy/New-Dutch-government-reshaping-foreign-policies/Kabinetsreactie-op-het-WRR-Rapport-Minder-pretentie-meer-ambitie.

and show respect for human rights. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, well known for its pro-Israel stance, came down with a heavy hand on this initiative. Sticking to the development agenda, the civic association refused to give in to the intense pressure which was backed up with the threat to eventually withdraw all subsidies.

To whom to entrust the mandate of implementation?

The reader is told repeatedly that development aid is a complicated business, difficult not only to monitor whilst the intervention is taking place but also when the time has come for assessing its impact. From the very beginning, the now Sub-Ministry of Development Cooperation has been in charge of managing the state budget for advancing overseas development. The report clearly signals that a change of policy is long overdue to overcome organizational deficiencies and produce better results than have been realized in past decades. The shortfall in expectations initially raised, set at quite modest levels of success, is attributed to a lack of professionalism within the ministerial apparatus. Those in charge are officials who have not been appointed for their expertise in the field of development issues and who actually often lack the knowledge to make adequate and appropriate decisions. Characteristic of the techno-managerial modus operandi of the ministerial department is a relentless drive to ever more accountability which has become self-defeating. The mindset of the officials suggests that development is a process which can and also should be engineered. The outcome of the plan of action requires that targets are measurable and fixed in advance. Professional development aid, as the WRR report grants, is not feasible without building up trust through a long-term presence and a thorough knowledge of the situation. The current human resources policy of the Dutch ministry is based on rotation rather than specialization. It would therefore be better to follow the example of most other Western countries and hand over the mandate of implementation to a separate organization. To work more productively, the advice is to set up NLAID, staffed by experienced professionals with headquarters in The Hague and offices in a few selected countries. Although the recently installed neoconservative government has accepted the WRR report as the roadmap for a new aid policy, it has rejected changing the organizational format. Turning down the well-argued recommendation to outsource the handling of the state budget to a separate agency, outside of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a powerful inside lobby in collusion with Foreign Office pundits must have

surmised that such a transfer of the mandate would inevitably lead to a loss of control over when, where, how and on what to spend development aid. Thus the NLAID option was hastily swept under the political carpet, a decision which surprisingly enough seems to have escaped public notice.

The geopolitical shift in the world order

What remains much understated in the analysis is the impact of the geopolitical shift in power brought about by the growing influence of the BRIC countries. Past policies have often not been motivated by a genuine desire to accelerate development but have their origin in the struggle for power at the transnational level or the search for economic profit beyond national borders. That this is not going to change in the near future is illustrated by the intent of the new Dutch government to employ, although without much fanfare, development aid for the promotion of Dutch products and services abroad. There is a clear reluctance in the West at large to come to terms with the loss of supremacy built up during the long colonial epoch and tenaciously held onto in the subsequent half a century. But the tide is turning and the rightful claims of countries and peoples for a better deal than they have been receiving so far cannot be postponed much longer. *Kafiyaa* (Enough!) was the cry with which huge crowds belonging to the middle class took to the streets in Egypt. A year earlier masses of Red Shirts with a rural background shouted similar slogans in downtown Bangkok. The redistribution of the spoils gained from living on and off the planet will lead to rising friction and contestation on both sides of the divide, a scenario of turbulence which is counterproductive to the progress of humankind at large.

A major issue is going to be the stance taken by big business and the role of the two major financial agencies in the realignment of power politics beyond the nation state. Of course, no mention is made of the need to introduce a code of good conduct for multinational corporations, as once proposed by the Dutch Nobel laureate Jan Tinbergen, let alone allow for the introduction of the Tobin tax on mercantile capital. The World Bank and the IMF, both headquartered in Washington, are not only attuned in their policy directives, but also in their day-to-day interaction.[6] Considering the widely divergent

6 '[T]he link between the two organizations remains very close, even at the most practical level, with the staff of the Bank able to use their passes to enter the IMF building, and vice versa (the buildings are opposite sides of the street and are joined by a tunnel)' (Van Lieshout et al. 2010: 237).

interests at play, harmonizing development policies will not be an easy achievement. The stakeholders are in sharp competition with each other and not inclined to make compromises until the last possible round. As overstretched neo-imperial power, the hold of the USA on the economies and politics in most parts of the world is clearly slipping. In view of that predicament, the desire for a consistent and coherent policy framework for development is understandable but difficult to realize, since it requires a political process in which policymakers have to weigh up conflicting or even contradictory interests. Coherence in development policy, the report rightly argues, will only seriously get off the ground if it is placed high on the political agenda – and the chance of that happening is rather slim. The policy to be adopted may still be considered coherent but not with development as its organizing principle. Is there a basic commitment to redress the wide gap between the rich and the poor in the world in a spirit, if not of harmonious collaboration, then at least driven by the desire to reach a settlement which is fair to future generations? Can the welfare achieved in the West be attained globally – and if not, how do we deal with the consequences of denying large segments of the world population access to the security, comfort and dignity a minority of humankind has appropriated as their natural right? Finding answers to such questions requires an examination of all aspects of the globalization process: its manifestations and ramifications. New knowledge centres will have to be established to do so. In the Netherlands the landscape for nurturing academic expertise is particularly bleak since one of the former Ministers for Development Cooperation decided a decade ago to buy all the research input she needed from the World Bank. Even her own apparatus was disqualified from engaging in policy analysis. Eveline Herfkens had been on the board of the World Bank before her appointment as minister and when her political term was over she went back to further serve the bank's interests. Her imperious but persistent stance to rely unconditionally on the World Bank's agenda has had disastrous repercussions for chairs and departments of development studies at Dutch universities, as well as for a number of reputable research institutes. The badly required expertise will have to be built up all over again.

Whilst the WRR advice to do so was positively received by the Dutch government, much will depend on how this is going to be operationalized in practical terms. The acceptance of the World Bank as a global knowledge institution on development issues offers some clues. Not denying the rationale of this appraisal, I would like to suggest that the knowledge pouring out from Washington is strongly biased in favour of the policies and the interests of the moment. Rather than blueprint research, in which not

only the questions but also the answers are already built into the design, I would argue for an urgent need for the production of *freischwebende*, i.e. not preconceived, knowledge on the ins and outs of the globalization process. This charge is best left to academic institutions that are not unduly bound to narrow-minded and short-term policy agendas and eager to team up with their counterparts in China, India, Russia or Brazil on joint projects.[7] A global strategy requires collaborative research, as exemplified by the erstwhile Indo-Dutch Programme on Alternatives in Development (IDPAD). Notwithstanding a laudable research output, this joint research endeavour fell out of favour with the ministerial in-crowd. But banking on the cherished public-private partnership model of think tanks often set up to serve political interests or opting for another dead end, i.e. to get it commissioned to management consulting firms, is not advisable either. All said and done, investment in research expertise on development seems to remain a low priority. I am inclined to read the out-of-hand rejection of the Dutch cabinet of the concrete proposal in the WRR report to commit 6 per cent of the official development assistance (ODA) budget on building up the required expertise as a clear signal of disinterest in turning the tide. As a matter of fact, funding for academic research on development issues has been further reduced.

The globalization of development

The development agenda in the coming decades is going to revolve around the globalization of governance, politics and policies. In order to create momentum for this shift in focus the number of countries on which Dutch aid is going to be spent will be slashed to a much lower score, predominantly African ones. No other options are discussed, for instance, an issue-based rather than a country-based approach. The report's advice is to identify what it calls public goods, a concept first brought up by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) more than a decade ago, to which the Dutch would be willing to commit themselves in their contribution. The proposal is to concentrate on what the Dutch are good at and make that their core business. Of course, of the goods shortlisted, most are already partly or largely out of the public arena as a result of the drive towards marketing

7 But once more, on the condition that such research is not dictated by control of state or corporate business over designs and outputs. For a scathing review of the bureaucratic streamlining and surveillance of scholarly work, see Head (2011).

and privatization. The challenge is to elevate and introduce public space, institutions and agency at the international level which, under the onslaught of the Washington Consensus, rapidly faded away or have been completely obliterated, even at the level of the nation state. Turning to globalization as the primary focus of development policy is a suggestion that I endorse, although it is hardly a new one. In his review of the original Dutch edition of the WRR report referred to above, Jan Pronk drew attention to the Brandt report published three decades ago which, reflecting on the increased North-South interdependency, urged for a programme of joint action (Brandt and Independent Commission on International Development Issues 1982). It is in this arena that a new balance in the relationship between the over- and underprivileged of the world is going to be struck, one no longer marked by superiority and inferiority. The vocabulary of equality and social justice needs to be reintegrated into the agenda of development practitioners.

In the decades to come the strategy of globalization, which in the past took Western hegemony and domination for granted, should be reassessed and propelled by a drive towards equity and democratization. The overdevelopment of the West will have to be harnessed and redressed by allowing the Rest to get a much bigger slice of the cake. But no less significant than the West-Rest contrast is the social class divide across national and intercontinental borders, between those who benefit and those who do not, the included versus the excluded on our planet. The stage is set for a fierce and prolonged clash of interests, right from the local to global levels of interaction. I welcome the idea to spend development aid on keeping this confrontation, which is going to be a hostile one, under control to the greatest extent possible. The report rightly points out the overriding importance of the question of how to live together in a world order which is fair and just to all. It implies respect for and tolerance of civilizations and cultures other than the Western, in a give-and-take relationship, guaranteeing security, stability, well-being and dignity for all. To make that feasible would require, to begin with, a changed mentality of policymakers for whom development aid is something which is spent overseas to enable people to lead a better life than they have managed to do so far. Having pretended for long that the path-breakers of development show the way to the latecomers, as is still the basic message of the report under review, in the global perspective the frontrunners will have to come to terms with the idea that they are part of the problem rather than the solution. It is an uncomfortable truth, one which demands an agonizing reappraisal of the globalized regime we are heading for.

In present-day Europe the political verdict is that multiculturalism has failed. The standard called for now is adherence to a set of liberal values as they have grown in the Western homelands. That appeal, however, masks an insistence on assimilation, the surrender of 'deviant' identities for the sake of integration into the commonweal of the society newcomers have entered. The backlash which has been unleashed in the Netherlands, and not only there, has much to do with the fact that many people seem to have lost their basic security. The resentment that is felt is largely against the manifestations of a globalization process which, among many other things, has encouraged a willy-nilly multiculturalism. Right-wing politicians have capitalized on the anxiety that this has caused by drumming up xenophobic feelings. They want to cleanse the Dutch landscape from alien impurities and proclaim to remain embedded in 'our own culture', construed around an imaginary Judeo-Christian heritage. To combat the campaign of 'a return to the way things used to be in our Polderland', nostalgically harking back to a past that never was, NGOs would have to become much more active at home and promote, for the sake of development, a civil society and economy with open borders and open minds.

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15 W.F. Wertheim: A Sociological Chronicler of Revolutionary Change

En route to a colonial career

Willem Frederik (Wim) Wertheim was born in St. Petersburg in 1907 and spent his early years there. Wim and his slightly older brother were the sons of Dutch parents who, as expatriates, were part of the city's bourgeoisie. With their father a well-to-do businessman, the household included three live-in servants, and nannies were employed to take care of bringing up the boys. After the 1917 revolution, all expats had to leave the country and in 1918 the family returned to the Netherlands. After secondary school Wim read law at the University of Leiden, completing his studies by the end of 1928. The economic crisis that had broken out made it difficult to find a suitable job and his applications for a position in the civil service came to nothing. A public appeal for law graduates prepared to complete an extra course in the law of the East Indies in preparation for an appointment to the colonial judiciary offered Wim a way out of his predicament. The lectures he had to attend allowed him sufficient free time to write a dissertation. Known as a good student, a prominent professor of civil law, Eduard Meijers, proved willing to become his mentor. Wim obtained his doctorate in mid-1930 and, before the year was out, had also taken his examination in the law of the East Indies. Late in 1930 he married Hetty Gijse Weenink, whom he had met at university and who was to remain closely involved in her husband's career until her death in 1988. Shortly after their marriage the young couple departed for the Orient (Wertheim and Wertheim-Gijse Weenink 1991).

On arrival, Wim was appointed to the judiciary of the Lampong[1] districts in South Sumatra. In this position, he gained valuable practical experience in the law to which the indigenous population was subjected. But his stay in Telok Betong did not last long: within six months, the young lawyer was invited – on the recommendation of his mentor in Leiden – to work at the Department of Justice in Batavia. Wim and his wife automatically became integrated in the colonial lifestyle, which meant that their social life was limited to contact with the European community. Their residence reflected their status and rank as members of the elite, and domestic servants were employed to run the household and look after their three children, born

1 Now written as 'Lampung' in Bahasa Indonesia.

between 1933 and 1936. The couple had already learned during the outward voyage to avoid contact with all kinds of 'others' and their initial placement at an outstation completed their habituation to the code of decent conduct. Back in the colonial headquarters, however, it proved a little easier to break through the isolation of the white caste. The Wertheims' interest in art and culture – Hetty gave song recitals accompanied by Wim on the piano – contributed to their slowly widening field of social interaction. The circle they now moved in was lightly mixed, as a consequence of the presence of highly educated Indo-Europeans, while in Wim's department at headquarters there was also some degree of mixed blood. But, even in this late colonial period, there could be no question of social intercourse between the white elite and the Indonesian people.

That changed somewhat in 1936, on Wim's nomination, at the age of 29, to a professorship at the Law School in Batavia. It brought him into contact with well-educated Indonesians and Chinese born in the colony; some as colleagues, but most of them as students. The expansion of the colonial machinery had made it necessary for members of the Indonesian population to be permitted entry to the lower ranks of the civil service. A small vanguard succeeded in accessing one of the few courses of higher education available in the colony, or even attending university in the Netherlands. The costs involved made it clear that, although they were – with a few exceptions – excluded from top-level positions in the bureaucracy, they came from the elite of Indonesian society. The racial discrimination they suffered would certainly strengthen their nationalist aspirations, especially in this circle.

Wim now became familiar with that spirit of resistance and his understanding for it only increased through his contact with colleagues who worked on *De Stuw*, a periodical that argued for a less reactionary and repressive policy than was setting the colonial tone during these years. Wim's conversion onto a moderately progressive track was strengthened when, in the course of his work, he acquired better knowledge of the miserable conditions in which the mass of the Indonesian population existed. A coolie budget survey conducted in 1939-40 showed that, during the ongoing economic crisis of that period, the workforce on the sugar plantations of Central Java had to survive on a daily food ration of 1,300-1,400 calories, and in some cases as little as 900 calories or less.[2] Receiving students at his

2 This critical level of nutrition, which amounts to no more than a survival ration, must be seen in the light of data on wages. According to the source that Wertheim refers to, male field coolies on sugar plantations in Central Java were paid 1.1 cents per hour, while women were

home and attending meetings of their student association, Wim developed a growing appreciation of their desire for independence. Yet this was only one side of his shift towards a dissenting perspective. It was accompanied by an increasing interest in the system of economic exploitation – an awareness fuelled by his realization that, under colonial rule, there were hardly any limits to the power of Western corporate business. A further sobering insight was that, after the outbreak of World War II in Europe, no effort was made to accommodate even the most minimal desire for the country's autonomy. As a member of the government committee set up to formulate recommendations on constitutional change, Wim was asked to draft a report on racial discrimination. Hearings were held in which a whole procession of people testified regarding discriminatory practices to which they had been exposed both at work and in their everyday lives. However, the political leadership of the colonial enterprise – itself driven out of its homeland after the German invasion – saw any alleviation of the regime of foreign occupation as taboo. The Dutch government in exile in London rejected any concrete proposals for reform.

The downfall of the colonial regime was sealed when Japan, after a short-lived war in the spring of 1942, overran the territory of the Dutch East Indies. The former masters and their families were interned – with men and women in separate camps – and the leaders of the nationalist movement acquired a greater opportunity, under the domination of the new Asian superpower, to pursue their aims. While he was interned, Wim discussed with like-minded internees, of a socialist to social-democratic bent, what the future had in store. His leftist leanings crystallized under Japanese occupation which made him realize the dead weight of oppression. In his own words, it then became clear to him that colonialism and capitalism were like identical twins. With all the uncertainties of the time, he became convinced that after the expected liberation – news of the end of the war in Europe had filtered through to the camps – the old times would not return in the colony. Yet, the majority of his fellow inmates responded with incredulity and aversion when they heard that nationalist leaders Bung Sukarno and Mohammed Hatta had declared Indonesian independence on 17 August 1945. Two weeks later, Wim succeeded in reaching Batavia – now known as Jakarta – to help build up the Red Cross organization, an urgent task in the power vacuum of this period. Another two weeks later, he was reunited with his wife and children, who had also survived their detention.

paid even less. These data are from the final report of the coolie budget committee (Koelie Budgetcommissie 1941). See also Huizenga (1958).

Wim met with the returned colonial authorities, but remained at a distance from them, instead seeking contact with high-ranking Indonesian leaders in a futile attempt to prevent further escalation between the parties, who were already in open conflict with each other. He also approached Dutch politicians directly and tried to convince them that the old order could never be restored, but his pleas fell on deaf ears. The former colonial rulers proved completely devoid of any understanding of the anti-colonial sentiments that had rapidly gained momentum in 'our Indies'. This inability to see the reality unfolding in front of their eyes applied equally to the majority of those repatriated to the Netherlands. But the Wertheims returned in early 1946 in a completely different state of mind than when they had departed for the colony fifteen years earlier.

Change of discipline

Once back in the Netherlands, Wim wasted no time in calling publicly for the acceptance and recognition of Indonesian independence (Wertheim 1946). His dissenting stance was not welcomed in official circles and cost him a professorship in the Law Faculty at the University of Leiden, where he topped the list of candidates. This was not too much of a disappointment for Wim, however, as Leiden had long been an avid supporter of colonial policies and would remain so in the immediate future. The scholarly ambit and social outlook of this impassioned academic now took him in a very different direction. This new course in his life was facilitated by historian Jan Romein, on whose recommendation Wim was offered a professorship in the newly established Political and Social Science Faculty at the Municipal University of Amsterdam. The two became not only colleagues, but also close friends. It was a bond founded on a shared perspective on past and future human development (see Wertheim 1980-81). This common strand rested on a political way of thinking based on belief and hope in a socialist future and extended to the faculty as a whole. Clearly, the well-wishers that Wim encountered on the home front saw him as an advocate of the Indonesian cause. He was only too pleased to take on this role and became first a member and shortly afterwards chairman of the Vereniging Nederland-Indonesïe (Netherlands-Indonesia Association).

His uncompromising stance led to a break with many colleagues and acquaintances from the colonial past. In their eyes, Wim had gone from being a supporter of what was seen as a civilizing mission to a defector who defended rebels out to disrupt the public order in what was still acclaimed

as 'our Indies'. Negotiation was not considered an option in resolving the escalating conflict. The decision to take a hard line was partly motivated by the threat of a coup in the Netherlands planned by a shady bunch of right-wing figures – politicians, former colonial officials, high-ranking members of the military and magnates of colonial business houses – who had united around the slogan 'Indië verloren, rampspoed geboren', which roughly translates as 'If the Indies are lost, catastrophe follows'. The plans in place for a coup d'état included killing a leading social-democratic politician. The conspirators were afraid that this moderately leftist party would resist the military campaign they were about to launch in the colony to put down the revolt, which they persisted in portraying as incited by a small clique of rabble-rousers.

In the event, the coup got no further than the planning stage; they had intended to undertake it with the approval of the monarchy, but that support never materialized. If such a restorative putsch had occurred, it is doubtful whether a radical firebrand like Wim would have remained a free man. Under pressure from the Indies lobby – now out of public sight but still very influential – the leading political parties yielded to the call for military intervention to restore 'law and order' in the lost colony. Only the Dutch Communist Party, which still had a large support base in those years, spoke out against this last colonial war and declared its solidarity with the not-insubstantial number of enlisted soldiers who refused to go and reoccupy 'the Indies'. These objectors faced stiff punishment. As the fighting overseas increased in ferocity, national emotions ran high and the voices of those who refused to swear allegiance to the patriotic cause were scarcely heard. The largely like-minded press was vehement in its condemnation of friends of the enemy, like Wertheim. By contrast, leftist media outlets gave him space to present his facts, opinions and commentaries. He soon joined the editorial board of the monthly publication *De Nieuwe Stem*, which in the Cold War years sought space for a non-aligned course – a third way – between the two superpowers in the new world order. Wim's refusal to commit himself unconditionally to the 'free West' contributed to his reputation as a political troublemaker or, even worse, a communist sympathizer. On returning from a conference in Poland in 1948, he refused an order to allow the board of the university to see a speech he had given on behalf of the Dutch delegation: he considered it a violation of his academic freedom and paid no heed to the instruction. When the speech was published shortly afterwards in the weekly magazine *Vrij Nederland*, it was clear that, besides criticizing Western capitalism, he had also condemned the intolerance of the Soviet Union towards dissenters.

The colonial practice that Wim had experienced at first hand proved to have been an excellent training ground for him. His stay at colonial headquarters gave him the know-how required to design the programme of teaching and research that he pursued as holder of the chair in the history and sociology of Indonesia that had been set up in Amsterdam in 1945. The public lecture with which he accepted his appointment – entitled 'The Indo-Europeans in Indonesia' (Wertheim 1947) – dealt with the organizing principle of colonial rule: relations between the races of which that society was comprised. The main dividing line was of course between white and brown but, in the course of time, legal jurisprudence had introduced a finely graded hierarchy. The prominence given to racial demarcations, he claimed, was often intended to sow discord rather than promote cohesion, and to safeguard the legitimacy of dominance of the few over the many. With a series of lectures in 1948, Wim voiced his opposition to this delusion of racial superiority and inferiority which, in his view, dated from the nineteenth century and had to be expunged before it could destroy the fabric of mankind (Wertheim 1949). But condemning racism as a myth did not lead to its disappearance. Now presented as a clash of civilizations, the doctrine of racial segmentation is once again enjoying a heyday in the early years of the twenty-first century, with roots that clearly go back to the colonial past.

Wim made use of the insights he had acquired during his career in the Indies to address the problem of how to determine his position in a discipline different to that in which he had been educated and trained. He had to replace the legal perspective from which he was accustomed to view the world with a social scientific approach. The development of a sociological vision required more than simply familiarizing himself with the jargon and literature of another discipline. It also required the ability to look at the world through a different lens, to see what presents itself as reality from a new angle. Although Wim did not speak in any detail about this change of course in his life, I tend to see such a radical shift of perspective as a significant milestone on the long road that he travelled. The sociological imagination that he must already have possessed resounds strongly even in his early work. In a volume of essays, *Herrijzend Azië* (Resurgent Asia) (Wertheim 1950c), he put on record the decline of the colonial idea. This certainly did not mean that he remained bogged down in considerations of the past. What occupied him in the mid-twentieth century was, on the one hand, the global eclipse of colonialism and, on the other, what this sea change promised for the advent of the world's most populous continent, which was displaying renewed vigour (Wertheim 1950b). What form would this take?

Breaking away from Orientalist exceptionalism

Wim analysed the geopolitical changes that were taking place with an open mind. The era of development politics that emerged started with the call for cooperation between countries that were portrayed as either 'advanced' or 'backward'. Wim voiced an opinion on the divide itself, how it had come about and how it could best be bridged, which deviated from the prevailing wisdom. But, for the time being, he stayed close to the field of study that was familiar to him and expressed his ideas on the state of development in Indonesia in a book entitled *Indonesian Society in Transition: A Study of Social Change* (Wertheim 1956).[3] The study took a radically different stance to most textbooks. To start with, it was not written from the top down, but from the bottom up. Rather than describing the comings and goings of princes, state and governance, Wim focused on the wide range of events unfolding at the base of society. It evinced a sociological perspective described in the preface as 'to pay due attention to basic processes and facts such as competition between social strata, rural discontent, hunger, human bondage, class strife, which are decisive for future developments' (Wertheim 1956). In his depiction of the history of the country and its people, it was not political moments that determined the continuity of past and present, but processes of social change that culminated in the struggle for independence. Wim's historical argument did not begin with the arrival of the first Dutch ships at the end of the sixteenth century and focus on the final century of their colonial presence – as was customary in accounts originating in the Netherlands. Moreover, rather than presenting the results of foreign domination as a successful civilizing mission, the essence of the colonial era was described as a pattern of ossification and subordination.

To distance himself from the classical study of Asia, known widely as Orientalism, Wim changed the focus of his academic programme in Amsterdam. It was now called the Modern History and Sociology of Southeast Asia. This did not mean that he was not interested in what had happened in the unknown realm of the archipelago before the arrival of the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (Dutch East India Company, VOC) – far from it. He described this remote past on the basis of the dissertation left behind by Jacob van Leur. This promising historian, who had died at an early age, had interpreted the available source material not merely as an ode to the VOC. Wim arranged for the translation of this important sociological-historical

3 After a second edition in 1959, the book was reprinted in 1964. Several editions have been published in Bahasa Indonesia.

study of the pre-colonial past and published it under the title *Indonesian Trade and Society* as the first of a series in English (Van Leur 1955). With this publication, Wim drew the attention of foreign colleagues to scholarly work on Indonesia in Dutch that had previously been inaccessible to them. Of equally great importance was his initiative to publish a selection of the works of Julius Boeke on the dualistic nature of the colonial economy (Wertheim 1966). The publication was accompanied by a number of critical comments on the concept of dualism and appeared in the same series as the Van Leur translation: 'Selected Studies on Indonesia by Dutch Scholars'.

On sabbatical leave in postcolonial Asia

In 1956-57, after ten years of teaching, research and publications, supplemented with a wide variety of activities outside the university, Wim was delighted to go on sabbatical leave – accompanied by Hetty – to the new Asia. Together they kept a diary of where they went, what they did and whom they met (Wertheim 1992a). The invitation to spend the year in Indonesia was extended by the Indonesian government in appreciation of the good service that Wim had performed in his role as chairman of the Netherlands-Indonesia Association. He and Hetty decided to make a stop in South Asia on the outward journey. The visit, lasting about two weeks, included a short stay in Pakistan for a lecture at the University of Lahore before going on to North India. Wim gave lectures on postcolonial Indonesia at universities and research institutes in Delhi, Aligarh, Lucknow and Calcutta, reaching Jakarta in early October 1956.

At the Agricultural University in Bogor, Wim was a guest professor in the Department of Agrarian Sociology and taught a course on social demography, a theme that was high on his agenda at that time. He was delighted to join staff members on a trip to East Java, where students were conducting rural research. It was the same area in which studies of peasant households had been carried out in the colonial era. The visit gave Wim the opportunity to compare the present with the earlier situation. As well as some progress, especially in education, he also encountered stagnation and even deterioration in the local people's living standards, including a reduction in what sharecroppers used to get from the paddy harvest. After independence, the divide between landowners and the landless had grown even bigger than before, and Wim particularly noted the absence of cottage industry. He deliberately chose an anthropological research method, in contrast to the standard technique of investigations in the colonial era, when village

leaders and elders used to be called to the sub-district town where they were interviewed by the official researcher. As Wim put it himself:

> By contrast, we spoke to peasants from different social classes, both more prosperous and poorer, in the field or in their homes. We not only questioned them about their personal circumstances, but also how they felt about the social relations in the village. These views could vary widely, according to their social position. We tried in this way to free ourselves from the official presentation of the situation, as usually expressed by leaders and elders, as representatives of the local 'establishment'. (Wertheim 1992a: 57-58)

In his reported findings, Wim emphasized the high population density in the Javanese countryside, which had risen further after decolonialization. Raising productivity per hectare by improving agricultural methods was one possible solution, but the chances of achieving that seemed remote. A more promising course of action was transmigration to the other, much less densely populated islands of the archipelago, combined with diversification of the economy, and especially industrialization, to relieve the pressure on the agricultural means of production. Increased economic activity outside the primary sector would help boost employment and, with a consequential fall in the consistently high birth rate, lead to lower demographic growth. He visited his old duty station in South Sumatra, which had become a magnet for newcomers relocating from Java, to determine how this transmigration had panned out in practice. A notable lack of means of livelihood other than agriculture in the areas of settlement was bound to lead to a steady decline in soil fertility. That alarming development would result in a pattern of static expansion that also seemed to be taking place in Java.

The Wertheims returned to Lampong in the company of Kampto Utomo, a staff member of the sociology department at the Agricultural University. He accompanied them as a guide through the region, which was familiar to him from his doctoral research into the development and impact of transmigration. Under Wim's supervision, Kampto Utomo succeeded in writing up his findings in the months that followed. As guest supervisor and promoter at the Institut Pertanian in Bogor, Wim was able to congratulate his junior colleague on the award of his doctorate a few days before the end of his stay in October 1957. In the preceding months the Wertheims had toured all parts of Java and further afield, to West Sumatra, Sulawesi and Bali – Wim for lectures and study visits and Hetty for song recitals, but almost always in each other's company. What is striking when reading the

extensive account of their travels is the cordial treatment they encountered in meetings with prominent figures, high-ranking officials and provincial governors, including a reception by President Sukarno in his palace. These contacts with the country's elite circles were not surprising as, wherever he went, Wim met his former pupils from the Law School, who now held high positions as politicians or bureaucrats and who were pleased to help him travel wherever he wanted to go and find out what he wanted to know.

The sabbatical leave was, however, not yet over. What would turn out to be the most exciting part took place just before returning home: a visit to mainland China. Before leaving the Netherlands, during a conversation with the official representative of the People's Republic, Wim had expressed a desire to visit the country. His request was forwarded to the authorities and in Indonesia, by way of the friendship accord between the two countries, he managed to obtain an invitation for an official visit of a month. In those years, China was still a closed society and the diary that the Wertheims kept during their stay provided plenty of material for articles in periodicals that were favourably inclined towards the Chinese regime. The interpreter who accompanied them not only had the job of translating but also had to ensure that they understood 'the correct meaning' of what they saw and heard. Their welcome was very cordial but they were treated largely as tourists and Wim repeatedly expressed the wish to visit villages and talk to the peasants. The programme did allow him some opportunity to talk to Chinese from Indonesia, who had settled in the People's Republic after the revolution. He was not, however, given permission to meet the internationally known ethnologist Fei Hsiao Tung in Peking, who was still working at his academic institute but was subject to fierce criticism for his 'right-wing' ideas.

Wim was very aware that the responses he received from government bodies were ideologically tinted, which made him even more keen to visit the countryside. His obstinate desire to get an idea of the situation in China's collectivized agriculture was eventually fulfilled. He got permission to visit a number of large-scale agricultural estates, state-run farms and cooperatives in both the north and south of the country. He was even allowed to go further than simply receiving information from managers, and could actually talk to farmers themselves – although these meetings were inevitably mediated by the presence of officials. Wim took account of this surveillance in the travelogue notes that he sent home about the lectures he gave. These lectures – to the staff of the institutes he visited – solicited little in the way of agreement from his audiences. Wim knew that he had been taken to 'model' enterprises and did not hesitate to lecture the officials who had accompanied him if they tried to influence the answers to his questions.

Nor did he desist from giving advice – for example, on planting crops around the home to supplement the household income. This tendency to counsel others would remain with Wim for his entire life.

He summarized his conclusions in an article, once again published in *De Nieuwe Stem* (Wertheim 1958). It was a positive judgement on the second phase of the land reforms that had led to the abolition of private property in China. This had improved cultivation methods and thereby increased productivity, and encouraged secondary activities to push up the level of prosperity by expanding the area of arable land, especially in the hills. Wim left no doubt about the impact of this policy – progress – in the most densely populated continent where the large mass of the population still only just eked out an existence. Back in Jakarta, Wim summed up the lessons of his study year in Asia in a farewell speech (Wertheim 1992b). The biggest problem, he felt, was the abject poverty in which the majority of the inhabitants of India lived, in both town and country. Living standards in Indonesia were slightly better, especially among the better-off, but economic need as a result of insufficient land, its low yield where irrigation was lacking, and absence of employment outside agriculture, was also widespread. There was a lack of effective leadership in the development process. These considerable shortcomings weighed heavily in the balance compared to improved healthcare and education. Wim was more hopeful regarding China. After the revolution, strong leaders had come to power who had set about building up the country and improving the lot of the people. The problems they had to overcome were not inconsiderable, but there had been progress in all fields. The reduced poverty and improved living standards did not only benefit a small part of the population, but penetrated down to the base of Chinese society.

A wider field of study

Wim's comparative summary of what he had learnt in Asia was also the starting point for the agenda that he was to pursue back in Amsterdam. The first change he made was to expand the scope of his study far beyond the society on which his knowledge had initially been based. Although he remained interested in Indonesia, he also widened his perspective to embrace other parts of Asia. To emphasize that the comparative focus also applied to timescale – the study of both past and present – the name of the centre that Wim had established was changed to Sociologisch-Historisch Seminarium (Sociological-Historical Seminary). South and Southeast Asia

were added as regional areas of focus, a change that was also reflected in the specializations of the staff. In the following decade, the institute gradually expanded with the appointment of not only upcoming Indonesian specialists, but also PhD candidates engaged in conducting research on the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand, India and China.

I was one of the first batch of new additions. During my studies, I had increasingly concentrated on the sociology and history of Asia and I was now given a part-time job as one of four research assistants to my foremost mentor. At that time, Wim's institute was housed in what was originally called the Koloniaal Instituut (Colonial Institute). The building had been constructed in 1926 with funds from corporate business in the Netherlands Indies; it was renamed the Indisch Instituut (Indies Institute) after World War II, and in 1950 became the Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen (Royal Tropical Institute). As he walked to his room, Wim passed murals depicting colonial heroes from the past, including Governor-General Jan Pieterszoon Coen, who had expanded the power of the VOC with an extremely hard hand, and Johannes van den Bosch, who had led the cultivation system which had forced Javanese famers into tied labour. It was how the tale of the 'good old days' of colonial rule was kept alive. Wim's Seminarium was housed in two rooms of the building. In one room, Wim received visitors, held examinations and discussions, did his correspondence and made constant telephone calls. His secretary sat in the other room, kept company in turn by four assistants.

As research assistants we performed a wide range of chores: fetching or returning books to the library, correcting our mentor's proofs before printing, and accompanying him to lectures. But we also enjoyed the privilege of being supervised by Wim in conducting our own research. In my case, this was a historical-demographic study on Java's population growth. After graduation, Wim had set out a follow-up study programme for me, but a heated conflict between the Netherlands and Indonesia in the early 1960s put paid to my original plan to conduct research on Java. Wim found a solution to this problem when he met his renowned Indian colleague M.N. Srinivas at a conference, who suggested that he send me, together with fellow research assistant Chris Baks, to Gujarat. After experiencing some difficulties acquiring a scholarship, I arrived at my destination, a village in Gujarat, in late 1962. India was still largely a peasant society, which would take several decades to change. I chose where to do the research, but the methodology was decided in advance: anthropological fieldwork. Based on the experience gained during his own study year in Asia, my supervisor was convinced that the researcher must try to stay as close to reality as possible

and of course for a much longer time period than he himself had managed to do during his short field excursions. He also believed that the researcher should not gather data through interviews or surveys but should rely on participant observation, being physically present in the daily life and work of those he was studying, and engaging with a wide range of informants about what was happening in and around the site of investigation.[4]

Besides myself, fourteen other doctoral students had the privilege of being coached by Wim throughout the years and of being awarded their doctoral degrees, with Wim as promoter, at the University of Amsterdam. He always tried to find time to visit his PhD candidates in the field. In my case, that happened early in 1963. I had decided not to receive him in the village where I was conducting my fieldwork because of the lack of amenities in my accommodation, with no toilet or running water and no electricity. But in the next village, where I had arranged for him to stay in the comfortable house of a landowner, exactly what I had expected came to pass. Wim heard that his host employed farm labourers as bonded servants. He not only criticized this man and other large landlords but also made it abundantly clear that such practices were morally and socially reprehensible. These members of the elite listened to Wim in silence, but his opinions remained the main topic of discussion for many days after he had left. He had also responded with incredulity when, in answer to his repeated questioning, I told him that I had found no evidence that the landless proletariat resisted bondage. It was impossible, he insisted, as slaves have always and everywhere risen up against their masters. His critical comments kept me preoccupied. In the historical source documentation that I consulted extensively after completing my fieldwork, I also found no evidence of any organized proletarian resistance.[5]

A dissenting view on development

Wim had already expressed in an early publication (Wertheim 1950a) an opinion on the distinction between economically developed and

4 Of the student batch who presented Wim in 1971 with a volume of sociological essays *Buiten de Grenzen* (Outside the borders), celebrating his tenure for twenty-five years as professor at the University of Amsterdam, eleven had conducted their PhD research in this way (*Buiten de Grenzen* 1971).

5 This conclusion later proved incorrect, when I discovered an archive with factual evidence of a protest movement in the late-colonial period. I incorporated this revised view into a new publication: see Breman (2007), ch. 4.

underdeveloped areas that was at variance with the prevailing view. What was now labelled as the underdevelopment of the Southern Hemisphere, Wim saw as the consequence of colonial intervention, which had led to stagnation. He referred to the disbanding of the commission that had been set up in the Dutch East Indies after World War I to promote industry. The large-scale agribusiness lobby had successfully resisted economic diversification (Wertheim 1960; see also Gordon 2009). A considerable percentage of the cultivated land had traditionally been expropriated and could therefore not be used by the peasantry; peasants were forced to remain available to work as labourers on the plantations growing crops for export.

The pattern of shared poverty that had arisen on Java and elsewhere was not caused by a stubborn desire to hold on to a pre-capitalist tradition, but was the consequence of the advent of capitalist economic activity in a colonial or semi-colonial guise. The new mode of production was in foreign hands and exclusively served external interests. The native population became confined in a system that offered them insufficient opportunity to create any momentum for change of their own. Clifford Geertz described this downward spiral, evidenced by becoming immobilized in traditional structures and institutions, as 'involution' (Geertz 1963). Outside agriculture, there was little employment available. The man to land ratio had further worsened, but escape from the village offered no prospects of a better life. In a report on his urban research, Geertz (1956b) described a kind of economy that, a quarter of a century later, would be called the 'informal economy'. Wim included this quote in an essay of his own in 1964:

> The lack of opportunity for employment in the town, the growing stream of impoverished rural inhabitants moving there, and the generally low standard of living lead to the available opportunities for work being spread over large numbers of applicants each of whom has too little to do and is living on the very margin of minimal subsistence. The innumerable street-vendors, pedicab drivers, 'peons' and little clerks in the offices all testify to the same system, in which social justice takes precedence over efficiency and a minimal output per head is put up with so that the available means of subsistence can be spread over a maximum number of people. In urban industry, too, the efficiency and viability of an enterprise suffer from the social pressure of the environment, which demands that the factory owner takes on and maintains so many male or female workers that each has too little to live on and too much to die, while there is no incentive to and possibility of further investment left. (Geertz 1956b, quoted in Wertheim 1964d: 12)

Wim's article, originally written in Dutch, formed the introduction to a volume entitled *East-West Parallels: Sociological Approaches to Modern Asia* (Wertheim 1964a). This work once again illustrated his belief that a historicizing approach was necessary to understand social change. He was critical of the claim that the way to modernization in Asia was to follow the same path taken by Western societies and rejected as naïve the notion that the take-off experienced by the latter would be repeated. He explained his objections to the dominant view with what his colleague and friend, the historian Jan Romein, called the 'dialectics of progress'. This means that, in the course of development, pioneers and stragglers would not always remain in that position with respect to each other but, during the process of transformation, could change places. The possibility of this reversal in ranking between leaders and followers in development was well received by social scientists in countries that had only a few years previously freed themselves from (semi-)colonial domination. In 1976, I found a quotation from Wim's work on the name card of the A.N. Sinha Institute of Social Studies in Patna, India. It was an expression of approval by staff enamoured to read that the 'underdeveloped countries' had to develop themselves using their own strength rather than being confined in a rigid pattern of front runners and latecomers.

Fiercely opposing Indonesia's dictatorship and its donors in the West

In the years that followed, Wim's attention remained strongly focused on Indonesia. This was to a large extent due to the worsening political situation there, which culminated in 1965 in a military dictatorship that was to last for more than thirty years. The coup that ended the reign of Sukarno and brought General Suharto to power was met with relief in the West. But not by Wertheim who, together with other authoritative experts, spoke out fiercely against the regime change. Their condemnation focused on the murder by the army, aided by civil militias, of at least half a million of their compatriots. While international attention was focused largely on the violence in and around Jakarta, Wim was already writing early reports on the slaughter in Java, Sumatra and Bali of people considered to be left-wing activists or sympathizers. This reactionary fury was turned especially on the Partai Komunis Indonesia (Communist Party of Indonesia, PKI) against whom a campaign erupted between the autumn of 1965 and the spring of 1966, aimed at completely eradicating the movement. The primary targets

were party members and leaders, but the state-sponsored violence also focused on trade unions in which workers had united to demand higher wages, and the Barisan Tani Indonesia, the large peasant union that pressed for tenancy reform and the abolition of private land ownership, which was considered radical. The victims, who were often killed in horrific ways, were mainly land-poor and landless peasants in the countryside whose names and identities went unregistered. Those fortunate enough to escape with their lives in the orgy of hatred and cruelty disappeared into prison for an indeterminate length of time without ever standing trial for the 'crimes' they were alleged to have committed. Anyone who was suspected of being critical of the New Order was considered subversive.

With his protests against the reign of terror, Wim distanced himself from the prevailing wisdom in Dutch political circles, which accepted and approved the new regime. He underscored his divergent opinion by joining the newly established Komitee Indonesïe (Indonesia Committee) – a forum which voiced opposition to the right-wing seizure of power – and, in 1968, became its chairman. Wim participated in the protest against the official state visit of Suharto to the Netherlands in 1970 and, over the course of many years, met with refugees who kept him up to date on the situation in Indonesia and who found in Wim a spokesman for what they themselves were not able to say. Many exiles had been abroad when the coup took place and would be thrown into prison or sentenced to death if they returned. Wim helped them to get residence permits in the Netherlands and also called public attention to the more than 100,000 'suspects' confined in camps or prisons in Indonesia. I remember accompanying him to meet the Dutch prime minister to urge him to lodge a strong protest with the Indonesian government after the leaders of the peasant union and other trade unions had been sentenced to death in mock trials.[6] Such displays of solidarity were of course not welcomed by the regime in Indonesia but they let the victims, or at least their families and comrades, know that their suffering had invoked outrage and opposition abroad. When I visited the well-known novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer in 1989, after his release from a long period of detention, he was still under house arrest. Above the table in his workroom, there were portraits of Benedict Anderson and Wim Wertheim, two men whom he considered his patrons and who, in his words, had fought his cause like no other for many years.

6 This meeting with Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers took place 1990 and was mediated by Jan Pronk.

The advent of a dictatorship in its former colony was greeted in the Netherlands as heralding the start of better times. The members of the parliamentary delegation that undertook a working visit to Indonesia in 1967 enthusiastically reported on the hospitable welcome they had received in Jakarta. The leader of the delegation – a prominent politician of the Labour Party – praised the cordial atmosphere in which the talks were conducted. Restoration of good relations, he announced, would be profitable to Dutch business – a prediction that was readily fulfilled. Under the auspices of the Inter-Governmental Group on Indonesia (IGGI), an international consortium chaired by the Netherlands, steadily increasing flows of development aid were sent to Indonesia, which was rich in natural resources that the 'free world' needed. In a critical essay (Wertheim 1967), Wim claimed that what was passed off as development cooperation concealed a neocolonial policy aimed at subjugating the Southern Hemisphere to the Western powers. The countries receiving aid had become underdeveloped because of, and under the yoke of, foreign domination that had often lasted for centuries. The support now offered as redemption from poverty and deprivation was founded on the enlightened self-interest of the generous donors, and the desire to maintain their lead and increase their wealth in the global order. He supported this position by showing that the gap that had opened up historically between the 'advanced' and the 'backward' parts of the world was becoming wider rather than narrowing. Providing more aid, he said, would only make it wider still. His simple message was that development is a process that does not happen by itself but must be driven, not from the outside but from within and from the bottom up. He denounced both the argument that the private sector was the instigator of economic growth, and the trust in a government that served only the interests of a privileged class. In essence, he was arguing in favour of

> cultivating a certain feeling of self-respect among the mass of the population, arousing their dissatisfaction with the existing social and political relations and strengthening traditional peasant mistrust of a caste of public officials linked to the landed nobility. If a social revolution is required to achieve economic development, then the only acceptable form of aid is non-colonial and stimulates the resolve of the population no longer to accept its subjugation. (Wertheim 1967: 482, my translation)

These recommendations flew in the face of the prevailing and authorized practice of Western aid, including that of the Netherlands. Sponsoring what was called development worldwide became big business, in an era designated

the 'decade of development'. Since those heady days of the 1960s, the budget allocated by the Dutch government to overseas development activities has been drastically cut, and the ministry that once bore the name has been transformed into one promoting foreign trade. At the time, however, Jan Pronk and myself (both then based at the Netherlands Economic School in Rotterdam) took the opportunity presented by the publication of Wim's critical essay to organize a public debate between Wim and Jan Tinbergen, to present the arguments for and against the development policy that was being pursued. The meeting took place in Amsterdam in 1968, and the two speakers politely but clearly demonstrated their fundamental difference of opinion.

Evolution or revolution?

In the years that followed, the social climate gradually came to offer more space for voices and opinions that strongly deviated from the prevailing, and what was until then considered proper, discourse in and beyond the political sphere. There was increasing appreciation for Wim's work and his perspective on what was happening in the Third World. Jan Pronk, now a leader of the swing to the New Left in the Labour Party, became minister for development cooperation at the end of 1973; when taking office, he asked not only his own mentor Jan Tinbergen but also mine, Wim Wertheim, to become his advisors. This mark of recognition was no reason for Wim to shift his standpoint but he did begin to adopt a different style. He had always been very conventional in dress and use of language. The only exception to the former was his choice of attire when travelling to and from the institute: dressed in a heavy leather coat and a crash helmet, he would zip in and out of the city traffic on one of the motorized bikes which had become quite popular in the 1960s. But Wim was a courteous and obliging man who conducted himself according to the rules of professorial habitus. Inviting me home on the evening before I was to defend my dissertation, he asked me to address him, after the proceedings of the following day, as '*je*' rather than the more formal Dutch '*U*', as a sign of us being equals after I had been awarded my doctoral degree. Wim's less formal behaviour was also expressed in his more frequent appearance without a tie; but he remained a gentleman who was always polite to his critics, no matter how fierce their accusations. In the turbulence of the late 1960s, he sided with the student revolt which wanted to democratize the top-down style with which universities were run. This partisanship came naturally to him: he

had previously been a board member and then chairperson of the Verbond van Wetenschappelijke Onderzoekers (Association of Academic Researchers, VWO), a Dutch association which took a progressive stance during the Cold War period in dealing with issues concerning sustainable development and in opposition to political and bureaucratic disruption of academic freedom.

Wim had in the meantime extended the reach of his studies beyond Asia, though he made good use of the expertise he had gained. He now devoted his full attention to the shift from gradual processes of social change to accelerated transformation. This choice was inspired by two historical tipping points that he had experienced in his own lifetime: the Russian revolution in 1917 and the uprising and struggle for national liberation in Indonesia in 1945. These crucial events provided him with the insight that revolution, rather than evolution, can occur in an attempt to break through a state of stagnation or social ossification. As well as drawing on his own experience, his observation that, in large parts of Asia, decolonization had done little or nothing to improve the lot of the common man played an equally important role in his reassessment of the course development politics had taken. The essence of revolution should be derived from the direction the change would take. The pressing question that arose was whether human progress is best served by evolution. He referred to Barrington Moore, who observed that 'the costs of moderation have been at least as atrocious as those of revolution, perhaps a great deal more' (1966: 505). Wim saw the developments underway in China, Vietnam and elsewhere as expressions of an emancipatory trend – understood as fighting free from the forces of nature and as liberation from social domination – which, in his view, was taking place all around the world.

Wim's choice was for a perspective based not on stability and equilibrium, but on dynamism and change. His *Evolution and Revolution: The Rising Waves of Emancipation* was announced as 'sociology of a world in movement' (Wertheim 1971, 1974). It appeared in Dutch in 1971, in English in 1974, and then in several reprints.[7] The wavering progress made in the process of change that he observed and championed led him to review the book's subtitle. What was first described as a 'rising wave' was modified in the fourth reprint in 1975 to a more cautious 'long march'. But Wim continued to believe in his prognosis and criticized me for my more sceptical appraisal. The dedication that he wrote in the copy he presented to me read that 'when

7 Although the text was originally written in English, it took several years before it was published in this form. In the meantime, Hetty translated the English manuscript into Dutch, and this version was published first.

accelerators are triggered, an escalation of dissatisfaction can no longer be averted'. After he retired in 1971, the book remained on the reading list for students for many years.

The assertiveness with which Wim pointed the way to a better future did not mean that he expected his students to follow suit. He selected his PhD students for the interest and apparent competence that they showed, but without eroding their freedom to hold a different opinion from the start to the finish of their studies. To surround himself with a flock of disciples was not his style; it was not how he set up the department or recruited staff for it. These shades of opinion and widely varying social perspectives were reflected in the volume presented to him on his retirement which also included a bibliography of the extensive works that bore his name and had been published between 1946 and 1971 (*Buiten de Grenzen* 1971).

Focus on China's achievements

As a professor emeritus, Wim continued his scholarly work. In a new book on the sociology of ignorance (Wertheim 1975) he described the repression of unwelcome information that had been customary in the colonial system and which had surfaced again in the postcolonial era. A curtain of ignorance had made social reality invisible to a succession of leaders. The screen of elitist delusion driven by a desire for dominance concealed a mass rejection and denial of rank oppression.

China was now in the forefront of his interest. The 1949 revolution gave shape to the progress he envisaged and it was a desire to see how it had worked out that drove his recurrent excursions to the country. These visits occurred every seven years – 1957, 1964 and again in 1970-71 – as he noted in the reports of his ongoing findings (Wertheim 1993). They were short visits, the first and third together with his wife Hetty, and as far as possible to the rural locations he had visited before, to give him a reference point for what had happened in the intervening years. His final visit was in 1979, at the invitation of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development and accompanied by a member of that institute's staff (see Stiefel and Wertheim 1983). The results did not entirely confirm what Wim had expected to see. On the one hand, the transformation process that was underway seemed to offer an alternative to leaving the world's poor to the vagaries of the unbridled free market economy. But, on the other hand, the question arose whether the all-powerful state had not hampered rather than promoted the emancipation of the peasant

masses. The confidence that Wim had previously expressed in new socialist China lost much of its persuasive force when, during his final visit, he was forced to acknowledge that very little had materialized in the way of any genuine emancipation. Initiatives for local change were taken by expert party members from outside rather than by peasants themselves. The plan to return for a longer study focused on active participation at the local level fell through when the required permission from the authorities was not granted. Although Wim showed a certain reserve in expressing his appreciation of the Chinese regime, this reserve was too sparse and too nuanced for him to avoid the accusation that he was overly eager to see what he wanted to see. Above all, the progress he described in China failed to acknowledge the authoritarian nature of the state, which held the population in a straitjacket of subjugation.

The criticism he received was often based on the settling of old scores. In the first place, there was Wim's refusal to toe the line in the 'Indonesian question', his resolute refusal to align himself with a policy aimed at restoring the colonial empire. His fierce opposition had created a lot of bad feeling towards him, as had his attempt during the Cold War – together with like-minded colleagues – to seek a middle way between what was known as the 'free West' and the dark world behind the Iron Curtain. Later, Wim was referred to with some respect as a dissident, but his kind of dissidence was considered beyond the boundaries of required decency. During my visits to the now elderly couple, a clearly upset Hetty would show me the scrapbook in which she kept the unrelenting stream of criticism from newspapers and other periodicals. The cuttings varied from more or less objective responses of disagreement to personalized messages of hate. Wim's more positive views on China were undoubtedly coloured by his disappointment about postcolonial regimes elsewhere in Asia. The politicians who had taken charge after independence in Indonesia and in South Asia did no more than pay lip service to improving the miserable plight of the rural masses. Wim chose to distance himself from the kind of developmentalism which was inspired by the promise of an end to poverty and inequality in which the subaltern classes of mankind remained entrapped – a distancing that, with the benefit of hindsight, has attracted more support.

Wim admitted in later years that he had depicted the outcomes of the Chinese revolution too positively and had based his opinions on assumptions behind which a more sinister reality was hidden. He had remembered too little of the criticism that he himself had aimed at the kind of social scientific research that was customary during the colonial era, typified in this extract from 1964:

> A great distrust of 'official' informants, such as chieftains, village elders and 'experts' on customary law, is essential for a social anthropologist or sociologist doing fieldwork in the non-Western world. These people are in general only expressing the 'dominant' value systems. To detect hidden or overt forms of protest, the attention has to be shifted to how representatives of different layers of society think and feel about the society in which they live, and how they actually behave. (Wertheim 1964c: 37)

One reason for Wim to revise his earlier standpoint was undoubtedly the fact that China left the path it had initially taken after the revolution, abandoned its socialist doctrine and switched to a capitalist market economy. Wim expressed his disillusionment with this change and announced that the country had lost its attraction as a large-scale and unique social and ideological experiment. He could do little more than endorse what Barrington Moore had previously concluded, 'that in China too the claims of socialism rest on promise not performance' (1966: 506). As far as Wim was concerned, China's change of course at the end of the 1980s placed it back in the same situation as the Third World. Its unconditional surrender to what was portrayed as the free market signified not so much its subordination to Western hegemony as the abandonment of its own long march to a better, non-capitalist future. While Wim expressed his contempt for the neoliberal world order that had emerged and in which exploitation and oppression were inherent, he continued to believe until the end of his life in a revival of emancipatory forces. He wrote of this in what was to be his final book – *Third World Whence and Whither: Protective State versus Aggressive Market* (Wertheim 1997) – stating that the success of this revival depended on the return of a strong state founded on the democratic principles of the participation and shared power of those at the base of society. Wim appeared to have drawn up this final balance once again based on wishful thinking rather than on empirical reality.

Wertheim's legacy

How can Wim Wertheim's legacy be appraised in hindsight? As that of a great scholar who developed a vision based on social engagement that was diametrically opposed to the tone of self-satisfaction and assumed superiority that permeated Western social science. The study of modern Asia from a historical and comparative perspective owes much to this sociologist who

dared to venture off the beaten track. A large number of papers and articles published in international journals – usually written by himself in English, French, German or Russian – reflected the high regard his work and views enjoyed abroad. There is little doubt about Wim's achievements among his fellow scholars in the Netherlands, but his reputation as a dissident meant that he never received recognition from official bodies like the Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen (Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, KNAW) or, even more insulting, in his own field of study from the Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde (Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies, KITLV). He did, however, enjoy abundant respect abroad; a few examples will suffice by way of illustration. On Gunnar Myrdal's request, Wim was a member of a panel to which the Swedish scholar submitted his magnum opus *Asian Drama: An Enquiry into the Poverty of Nations* (Myrdal 1968) for comment before publication. Clifford Geertz, who as a young anthropologist conducted his first fieldwork in East Java in 1952-54, came to Amsterdam on his way to Indonesia in order to meet Wim and sent him the working paper that elaborated on his theory of involution. James Scott spoke in the foreword to his ground-breaking study *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (1976) of the inspiration he had derived from 'the brilliant Dutch scholar W.F. Wertheim, many of whose values and perspectives I have come to share'. And, lastly, Benedict Anderson was delighted to accept the invitation to deliver the Wertheim Lecture in 1992, entitled 'Long Distance Nationalism: World Capitalism and the Rise of Identity Politics'. It would not be difficult to add more prominent names to this list, fellow sociologists who feel indebted to a colleague who did not settle for an area study approach but had a much more ambitious goal in mind: to shed light on the long-term processes of change in which humanity is entwined.

How did Wim himself look back on his quarter of a century at the University of Amsterdam? In a contribution to a memorial book for the Faculty of Political and Social-Cultural Sciences in 1997, Wim wrote that he had seen his task as developing a sociology focused on the specific characteristics of Asiatic societies or, in more general terms, on those of the 'underdeveloped' parts of the world (Wertheim 1998). The programme he unfolded differed fundamentally from that of Leiden University, where the long tradition of Oriental studies had been transformed into the study of Asia as the history of 'Western expansion'. He opposed this Eurocentric approach by placing the internal dynamics of the world's most populous continent at the forefront. What Wim left behind after saying farewell to the university was a thriving

centre of Asian studies. The department responsible for sociological and anthropological teaching and research was expanded and transformed into the Centre for Asian Studies Amsterdam (CASA) in 1987. In 1992, it merged with the Postdoctoral Institute for Sociology, which resulted in the establishment of the Amsterdam School for Social-Scientific Research (ASSR). Wim heartily welcomed this initiative, as throughout his career he had advocated closer cooperation with colleagues who specialized in the study of Western societies. The separation of Western and non-Western sociology that had developed in the Netherlands was unique (see Breman 2015). The division was based on the assumption that Western sociological theory and concepts were not applicable to societies that had not experienced development towards and transition to a Western model. Until this transition occurred – it was assumed without doubt that it would occur – the study of their structure and culture had no place in general, that is Western, sociology. Wim, of course, thoroughly disagreed with this separate status for non-Western societies and their study. He interacted with his 'Western' colleagues, was permitted to join them now and again,[8] but remained an outsider. He was very enthusiastic about the merger that had now taken place in Amsterdam, not only bringing together Western and non-Western sociology but also broadened to include anthropology, political science and history. The new agenda, which promoted social science research in a comparative and historicizing perspective, was also in line with Wim's way of thinking.

When the merger came about, a Wertheim Lecture was introduced to mark the close of the Asian calendar of the academic year at the ASSR. The first in the series was held in 1992 and Wim took part in these special proceedings with a discussion on racism in both the colonial setting and in the metropolis.[9] What initially appeared to be a somewhat dated topic – colonialism was, after all, long gone – grew to become an important social issue in the years that followed. The advent of virulent racism would result in reconfirmation of the belief in Western superiority that had its roots in the colonial past. The 'clash of civilizations' notion derived from this development is an aberration that Wim fought against his whole life. Wim attended the lecture that bore his name every year until his death in 1998. The Amsterdam School no longer exists and Asian studies have also

8 For example, in 1960, he participated in a conference organized by the Nederlandse Sociologische Vereniging (Netherlands Sociological Association), to which he contributed a paper entitled 'Corruptie als sociologisch studie-object' ('Corruption as an object of sociological study'), published in the association's yearbook (Wertheim 1961).

9 For an earlier paper on this, see Wertheim (1990).

lost the gloss that Wim gave to them, but his memory and his work have fortunately been preserved.[10]

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10 Wim's personal archive has been deposited at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, where it is open to the public. His home library, a comprehensive collection of books and other texts, was donated to the institute at Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta set up and led by Sartono Kartodirdjo, who was awarded his doctoral degree under Wim's supervision for his study on peasant revolts in colonial Java.

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Epilogue: A World in Disorder

> [I]n the English mirror there is now no Indian reflection … [and] in the Indian mirror the English reflection may be very hard to get rid of, because in the Indian mind English possession has not been an idea but a reality; often a harsh one.
> – Paul Scott, *A Division of the Spoils* [1975] (1977:105)

The high tide of territorialized imperialism

The epoch of Western imperialism to which large parts of the world became subjected is considered to have ended around the mid-twentieth century. The rupture which bifurcated into what needs to be classified as multinational state formations resulted in a different global constellation than had been constructed during the high tide of European expansion in the nineteenth century. Although the colonizing powers obstinately refused to grant independence and fought their last colonial wars with excessive violence, the call for freedom from exploitation and suppression could no longer be obliterated. But the subjection to foreign power and authority often dated back to a much earlier past. Both the drawn-out course of subordination and the multiformity of colonial repression have remained understated in a historiography which predominantly focused on the expansion of Western nations in other continents. The annexation of regions and their inhabitants nearby or bordering on occupying nations has usually not been labelled as colonial incorporation. Despite this, separatist movements throughout history and around the world have insistently tried to turn forced fusion back into fission. The sustained incapacitation within the homeland of social identities classed as unfit, inferior or criminal testifies to a form of repression which bears witness to internal colonialism.

To bring civilization where it was lacking has been the opportune apology used to justify the search for gains far away from home. This pretext was the incentive for early forms of imperialism and refused to fade away as it progressed further. The growing resistance which erupted in the late-colonial era led to a subtle toning down of the rigidity with which it had initially been imposed. Instead of declaring civilization to be non-existent in the colonized regions, it was now acknowledged as being framed in different ways. Nevertheless, insistence on retention of an endemic heritage was seen as being held captive in a traditional mindset, blocking the passage to the prescribed modernity along Western lines. Colonial rule had to be

maintained to steer change in the desired direction. A panel of Dutch experts summed up how the late-colonial mission of developmentalism had spread welfarism in the East Indies. '*Something great has been achieved*' was the title of their stocktaking in an buoyant volume, published when the homeland was already under German occupation (Van Helsdingen and Hoogenberk 1941). This self-congratulatory praise went accompanied with the warning that the mission was on track but not yet completed. Indeed, the English edition brought out in 1945 was sponsored by the Dutch government with the proclaimed intent to resume the imperial project. *Mission Interrupted* (ibidem 1945), pleading the case to maintain colonial rule in the Indonesian archipelago, was meant for cost-free distribution within the international corridors of power, in the USA and Great Britain in particular. In vain, of course, since the war launched against Indonesia on the declaration of national sovereignty, was lost both militarily and diplomatically. The trauma that the longwinded process of decolonization had caused led to an abrupt turning away from the overseas region which had been the jewel in the Dutch crown. A mood of amnesia befell not only its political class but also public opinion. Historian of colonial ancestry Henri Baudet commented on this blackout.

> The overall picture is clear: the older generation, still involved in the past of the Indies, has stepped back; there has been a changing of the guard, and to the new generation which has succeeded it, colonialism means nothing; at best it is an unreal past, known only from hearsay. … But the psychological distance from the pre-war days of the empire to the present times has rapidly assumed immense proportions; indeed, the post-war conflicts with Indonesia seem very remote not only to young people, but to the country as a whole. (Baudet 1969: 127)

Developmentalism

The thesis underlying this collection of essays is that imperialism as an étatist undertaking lasted longer than is usually stated because the yoke of foreign rule did not end with decolonization. The new imperialism which emerged with the withering away of the former variant was imposed in a different geopolitical context and needed to be legitimated in a different mode of operation. The Universal Declaration on Human Rights was proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations at the end of 1948. The declaration aimed to establish the global validity of political, economic, social and

cultural rights intended to affirm the recognition of citizenship as well as guarantee a decent existence for all. The UN Charter was designed for universal application and emphasized the principles of liberty and equality together with legal protection against servitude and discrimination. The inherent equalization of very diverse social identities released racial features, religious disposition, tribal cultures and other collective categorizations from the stigma of inferiority which kept them confined in subalternity.

This was the outcome of a process of gestation which took a long time to materialize. The idea of equality had already surfaced in the early 1920s in the context of the Paris Peace Treaties at the end of World War I. During the International Labour Conference in 1919, trade union delegates from India and China spoke out against the exploitation of labour under the colonial powers and called for an end to inequality based on narrow concepts of race (Davy and Flüchter 2022). A similar reappraisal took place in the social sciences which, in their formative stage at the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth centuries, had divided the study of races around the world between anthropology and sociology. While anthropology would deal with the early phases in the evolution of the human species, sociology was considered to be the discipline of the advanced civilizations. Some realignment was, however, required when, as a result of decolonization, the world order started to change.

Was 'the white man's burden' lifted when the struggle for freedom put an end to colonial rule in the mid-twentieth century? Arguing that any scientific wisdom gathered on native customs and lore in the faraway domains should not be lost, Dutch politicians authorized a few universities – Leiden and Amsterdam, in particular – to establish chairs and courses in what was termed 'non-Western' sociology, dealing with the complex societies of former colonies. It was an odd label, since it declared what these societies were not but might become, passing through a route described as transitional. Seen as a separate discipline, non-Western sociology was ranked between anthropology (still devoted to tribal societies in places like Papua New Guinea and Suriname) and (Western) sociology. Unique to the Netherlands, it was actually an expression of parochialism, denying the universalizing agenda of scholarship put forward by thinkers like Marx, Weber, Tönnies or Durkheim (Breman 2015).

What was a questionable divide from the beginning soon ran into difficulties. The school of anthropology that focused on developmentalism did not hold with the study of tradition and 'backwardness'. A critical self-evaluation, which insisted on the acceptance of responsibility for the political implications of their published opinions, dovetailed with growing

awareness in the postcolonial societies about the uneven distribution of livelihoods (Lewis 1973). Harbingering civilization was no longer the tenet with which colonizing powers in the Northern Atlantic could advocate consolidation of the possessions they had acquired on faraway shores. The mindset that regarded white superiority over differently skinned ethnicities as beyond dispute did not subside. It continued to be expressed in a supremacy which Western society continued to wield but required another approach, now conceived as developmentalism. This new terminology indicated the stark contrast between countries whose populations had leapt forward in the march to progress and territories inhabited by people who remained confined in backwardness. The new paradigm was already constructed in the final stage of territorial imperialism. Albert Sarraut (1923) announced his *mise en valeur* thesis for the French overseas domains in the early 1920s. Frederick J.D. Lugard (1922) coined the same promise, adding value where it was missing, in British tropical Africa.

In the postcolonial era during the second half of the twentieth century, this pact was dressed up in a policy offering large-scale development aid by the former colonial taskmasters to stimulate economic growth in the territories they had lost. Behind the proffered generosity to facilitate the breaking down of inert stagnation, a donor strategy remained hidden which did not address the lack of development. The proposed package of charitable goodwill aimed at keeping dependency on the providers of the beneficent support intact. Of strategic importance in the now ongoing Cold War was to prevent recipients from paving their own way to the future and risk the desertion of still non-aligned countries to the Second World. Rather than facilitating a genuine catching up operation to end backwardness, the lofty vow of developmentalism has been instrumental in promoting a state-induced policy of neo-imperialism which propelled the global spread of predatory capitalism. This endeavour has spiralled in the lavish accumulation of wealth at the top end and impoverishment resulting from dispossession at the bottom. Since this veiled objective was considered to have been successfully accomplished around the turn to the twenty-first century, the humanitarian mission of developmentalism could once again be removed from the agenda of the altruistic sponsors.

As the main stakeholders of corporate capitalism, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have promoted the accelerated pace of globalization. In its 2022 annual report, the IMF anxiously points out a reversal of this trend. Deglobalization is perceived to be taking shape in geo-economic fragmentation as a result of low growth rates everywhere, but especially in low-income countries. This conclusion, however, refers

to capital investments. The geopolitics behind the deplorable change in direction and the dearth of affordable financing makes it peremptory to help the most vulnerable economies in their efforts to cope with much increased adversity. The impact leading to massive impoverishment is touched upon but remains without proper scrutiny. Neither does the transfer of capital to safe havens figure in the policy analysis. The extraction of heavily underpaid raw resources and the unrestrained use of cheap and exploited labour power appropriated in or from large parts of the Global South go on as before.

My volume focuses on a case study of Dutch and Belgian colonial praxis from the closing decades of the nineteenth century to the messy exit about three-quarters of a century later. The contents put on record the resolute drive of capitalist exploitation and its racist footprint from beginning to end. The heritage of imperial legacy has also remained detached from the homeland historiography in the postcolonial aftermath. Against this bifurcation into separate circuits, my approach to historicism has been to emphasize the interaction which took place between the establishment of a colonial state not only in close correspondence but also intertwined with étatist construction in the metropoles. The result was a process of state formation which proceeded simultaneously on both sides in the course of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. In the debate on the geopolitical reconfiguration which followed, the switch from multinational to mono-national states has remained an understated theme of discussion. In the postcolonial decades, the division into separate entities has invoked a divergence on how to codify both ends of the scale. While some of the social sciences – economics, political science, public administration – express their different character in terms of development, others – anthropology, sociology and history – have remained stuck in the contrast of Western versus non-Western (Breman 2015). The accelerated dynamics of globalization illustrates the incorrectness of suggesting a breakdown in transnational connectivity. The Commonwealth construction envisioned in the London declaration of 1949 was the British recipe for imperial politics in a postcolonial frame.

Coming to terms with the colonial past?

Why have I remained preoccupied with the study of a past theatre? Not because former generations of my family were part of the colonial landscape. I grew up in a milieu which did not extend far away from home. The working class in the Netherlands remained at the margins of business overseas. My appetite to find out was fed by curiosity. It stemmed from the question of

whether the escape from poverty, which enabled a better existence and the prospect of upward mobility in my country, was also a future lying ahead for the large part of humankind which had remained confined in exploitation and oppression. I have spent my academic career trying to find an answer to that inquiry. 'A Postcolonial Chronicle' was the subtitle of the original Dutch edition of this volume published in 2021 and retrospection has remained the hallmark of my argumentation. In the aftermath of World War II, both the Netherlands and, more than a decade later, Belgium refused to grant independence willingly to the East Indies in Southeast Asia and Congo in Central Africa, respectively. The last colonial wars fought by both homeland nations tried in vain to ferociously quell the spirit of freedom, as they had done with success in earlier revolts.

European colonialism continued to attract much interest after the demise of multinational nationhood. In 1975, a group of colonial historians attached to the University of Leiden founded the Centre for the History of European Expansion and, a few years later, organized a conference to discuss the pros and cons of the imperialist era. *Itinerario*, the centre's journal, published a selection of the papers which had been submitted under the heading 'History and Underdevelopment'. The major theme in this collection was to analyse the interdependence (or not) between the frontrunners in development and the latecomers (Blussé et al. 1980). Proponents of the *dependencia* theory in vogue in the 1960s and 1970s, who were also invited to the conference, did not find a ready audience for their dissenting views. Rudolf von Albertini spelled out the significance of the achievement morale which in his view determined the leap forward achieved in the core countries of the West. Referring to adepts of the modernization school, which enjoyed great popularity in the 1960s, he identified the main cause for the widely spread impasse found in Asia to the cultures of Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. These religious creeds, according to him, missed the precious potentiality which was a precondition for sparking development. His vision was in line with Max Weber, who had identified the root of economic growth as a Western syndrome.

There has never been a dearth of colonial historiography more contrarian in nature. Alongside the orthodox Marxist version – imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism – other authors drew attention to political incentives such as the quest for national glory or to quell social unrest in the metropoles. Also dissenting from conventional opinion were critics who related the search for European expansion to the emergence of social Darwinism in the nineteenth century. This ideology and its politics ventilated in aggressive terms – in confirmation of white mastery – in juxtaposition with defensive

intents – to ward off the threat posed by the yellow or black races. Such views usually found only a hearing in restricted conduits of adherents. When all is said and done, the mainstream verdict on colonialism until more than a quarter of a century after decolonization in the erstwhile metropoles was little different from those concocted and expressed in the colonial past.

Praise and blame in these quarters continued to be maintained as before and major reappraisals did not come to the fore. My publication on coolie labour held captive on Sumatra's East Coast stirred public opinion, as it the issue had in the beginning of the twentieth century, but met with critical reviews in several historical journals. It was shrugged off as a black page in our history which could be explained by the fact that colonial governance had still to be built up in the newly opened region of the archipelago. Reinforcement of the district administration and judiciary, as the minister of colonial affairs promised in parliament, would protect the workforce in this plantation belt from the reported widespread abuse. My scepticism in retrospect on the veracity and efficacy of this assurance was seen as unjust and exaggerated. A fair number of both Dutch and Belgian historians refused to reject the widely held public opinion that their forebears had been excellent colonial taskmasters.

Racism dressed up in a gestalt of otherness

I already dissociated myself at an early phase in my writings from the idea that modernization is an ideal typical feature of Western dynamics (Breman 1969). At the Leiden conference mentioned above, Cees Fasseur and Henri Baudet squarely identified themselves in line with the Orientalist view in their contribution, which discussed the postcolonial plight of Java's population. They warned that it would be inconsiderate to overstate the impact of Dutch colonial rule. The reification of economy and society duly acknowledged by them, was in their perception rooted in the self-propelled autochthonous structure and culture. Blocking the passage to development was according to them consequence of imminent obstacles too strong to be broken through from outside. They backed up their adjudication of permanent stagnation by referring to Julius Boeke's theory of dualism which counter-posed Oriental and Western economics (Boeke 1953). Boeke's assessment of a fixed binary suggested that since the Javanese peasantry lacked the acumen of economic rationality, their pauperization was as logical as it was unavoidable. In summing up the deliberations, conference chairman Henk Wesseling underscored the main opinion, which he himself

shared, that a set of propensities emerging from within had sparked off autonomous development in Europe. This premise meant that the absence of these conditionalities meant that the non-Western world remained behind in backwardness. In tune with this commentary, most conference participants disagreed with the dissenting notion that the imposition of colonial rule had paved the way to stagnation instead of development. The breeding ground needed to set these economies and societies in motion did not exist. I presume that, when the balance of the conference was struck in this direction, participants known to align themselves with contrasting opinions, among them Immanuel Wallerstein and Samir Amin, had already left the gathering.

For the time being, arrogant conceit has been obstinately sustained with renewed vigour. Niall Ferguson's *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (2003) is a striking example of this kind of publication. Ferguson leaves no doubts at all about the civilizing tribute made by colonial expansion on many shores. 'The British Empire was the biggest empire in all history. At its peak it governed a quarter of the world's land and people and dominated all its seas.' Serialized on a public television channel, his tale of glorification was much appreciated by a British audience eager to be reminded of the country's lost greatness. The praises sung so emphatically referred to British India, in particular, where, after a revolt in 1857, the colonial state began to be erected. The Indian Civil Service, a small 'fraternity of committed officials from the homeland', fulfilled the magnificent task of steering land and people towards progress. It is a eulogy in celebration of Rudyard Kipling's call to 'take up the white man's burden'. In an angry riposte, Shashi Tharoor branded Ferguson's laudatory as monstrous. His appropriate reaction – *Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India* (2017) – was no less polemical and publicity oriented. The imperial blessings which Ferguson forefronted – the successful boosting of free trade, free transfer of capital and free labour – can on many grounds be contradicted. In a more mature judgement and arguing against mainstream opinion, Bernard Cohn posited that India's socio-economic fabric and its political constellation during the eighteenth century were in par with Europe's (Cohn 1996). It means that the gap which subsequently developed was due to undiluted racism formally and informally instituted, as Tharoor emphasized.

It was a mentality of denigration which Paul Scott has highlighted in his *Raj Quartet* (1965-75), a habitus of conceit partly inspired by the effort colonialists made to keep their own fears and doubts at bay. The running theme of these four novels is the onset of decolonization and details how the established authority of British India in the headquarters of a district came

to forfeit its moral compass of self-justification and stolid credence in the mission of domination. It is a denouncement which has found corroboration in historical research. Taking stock of the evidence deposited in the archives of the Indian Political Intelligence agency, Patrick French confirmed that the gist of these documents irrefutably show 'that the British left India because they lost control over crucial areas of the administration, and lacked the will and the financial or military ability to recover control' (1998: xxii). As I have surmised in various chapters, late-colonial power and authority in the remote domains of the Netherlands and Belgium were equally affected by corrosion.

There was also no disposition at the commanding heights to take stock of Indonesian and Congolese experience with regard to work and life under racist surveillance. In the postcolonial aftermath, this heedlessness was rationalized with the spurious argument that practices retrospectively acknowledged as abusive had to be contextualized in the spirit of the time. This maxim squarely contradicts Leopold van Ranke's adage of mindfulness, assigning to students of history the task 'of judging the past, of instructing the present, for the benefit of future'. Glossing over this axiom has long allowed a mindless silence on genocide, enslavement and other naked and systematic violations of human rights. Both the Netherlands and Belgium are guilty of refusing to owe up to large-scale war crimes practiced when they tried to block the call to freedom from colonial rule. At the other end of the spectrum of retrospection, the craving for *tempo doeloe* (good old days) expresses wistful feelings stirred by the loss of an enjoyable lifestyle and recognition of the code of conduct inherent to it. Blotting out an overseas past which was irreparably lost was overtaken by a sense of grief for having become disconnected from colonial existence memorized in sentimental imagery.

The nostalgia expressed was fuelled by the massive arrival in the Netherlands of repatriates from the late 1940s to the end of the 1950s who in the struggle for repositioning themselves in mainstream society searched to bridge the rupture between their past and present identity. About one third of them came home to where they hailed from and had remained connected to also in their expatriate livelihood. But two-thirds of these immigrants were newcomers of a different ethnic identity who had never lived where they were now forced to settle down. Uprooted and alienated from their mores these people of non-white descent also were wont to hark back to a lost way of life. But having their origin in the lower ranks of the colonial hierarchy, they came to share a *tempo doeloe* memory quite distinct from the nostalgia of the expatriate and privileged white class. Postcolonial melancholia is how

Paul Gilroy (2005) has labelled this emotive mindset of a forlorn paradise. the loss of an enjoyable lifestyle and recognition of the superiority inherent to it. This is demonstrated, for example, by Hella Haasse's novel *Heren van de Thee* (1992, translated as *The Tea Lords*, 2010), which portrays the fortunes of a Dutch plantation owner. It exemplifies the genre of colonial novels, much appreciated by homeland readers, emphasizing the white boss as a benevolent master lording over his docile coolie workforce. Putting these reminiscences on record, as Sarah de Mul has observed, should not be seen as emphatically dwelling on an outdated past. Those fabricated tales play a crucial role in how to come to terms (or not) with multiculturalism. In the ongoing reformulation of Dutch citizenship, culture and identity, she correctly concludes:

> …[I]t seems pertinent to understand *tempo doeloe* sentiments not as innocent yearnings but as technologies of imperialist nostalgia that require reflection within the realms of postcolonial scrutiny. (De Mul 2010: 425)

A more obnoxious historiography bordering on jingoism also adds to the wide gamut of updated scrutiny. Nigel Biggar's publication *Colonialism: A Moral Reckoning* (2023) is the latest example of these kinds of appreciative reminiscences. British imperialism, according to him, was not racist, exploitative or wantonly violent. It showed itself capable of correcting its sins and errors, and learning from them. And over the course of time it became increasingly motivated by Christian humanitarianism and intent upon preparing colonized people for self-government. Remarkably, Biggar pronounces this glorification without dismissing the malpractices cascading into crimes with which distant lands and peoples were incorporated in a multinational frame of statecraft. While not shying away from this flipside, elsewhere he either denies on other pages the veracity of these allegations or blatantly exerts himself to justify why and how is it possible to combine his tribute to imperialism with admitting that abuse and injustice were widely prevalent. Biggar believes that human equality is a Christian value that has frequently driven Western choices and behaviour. In reaction to criticism, he published an article in *The Times* entitled 'Don't Feel Guilty about Our Colonial History' (2017), in which he called for an end to historical self-flagellation. A large number of Oxford scholars responded with an open letter in which they strongly distanced themselves from Biggar's views, pointing out that they gave rise to 'a pervasive sense that contemporary inequalities are underpinned by a complacent, even celebratory, attitude towards its imperial past' (Lloyd 2023).

Imperial governmentality

Critique of a very different nature on the occupation and incorporation of overseas territories by the main European powers was already vented when the high tide of imperialism was taking shape. Florian Wagner (2022) has described and analysed how, in the late nineteenth century, high-ranking practitioners of colonial management joined forces to conceptualize a transnational perspective of colonial architecture. Their project of imperial governmentality was launched at a meeting held in 1893 by a group of influential colonial officials from thirteen countries who together founded the Institut colonial international (International Colonial Institute, ICI) in Brussels. Through the gaze of the ICI, Wagner argues that this endeavour aimed at international cooperation to break through the bind which connected mono-nationalist statecraft on both sides of the imperial fence. In my opinion, Wagner has overstated his case of idealistically driven dissent from conventional colonial rule by labelling the outcome of this initiative as the most important colonial think tank of the twentieth century.

Designated as an institute, the ICI never became more than a club of like-minded members who, in the initial stage, still shared an all-white identity. Acting as a platform for the promotion of policy coordination, they based their agenda on their commonality of interest in consolidating imperialist supremacy while delegitimizing more radical claims for independence. Their agenda suggested a modicum of self-determination for the colonial machinery which would be structured in a transnationalized frame of interconnectedness. However, both suggestions – more autonomy and imperial governmentality cut loose from the European homelands – were anathema to the prevailing colonial rule and consequently their reformist lobby found no hearing in the metropolitan headquarters. Wagner conceded that the ICI has only been occasionally and superficially mentioned in colonial studies and has remained strikingly absent in standard accounts of international organizations.

While the swelling wave of decolonization in the aftermath of World War II changed the geopolitical composition of the Global South, the board of the ICI responded to this crucial realignment of the planetary order by changing its name in 1949 to the Institut international des civilisations différentes (International Institute of Differing Civilizations, INCIDI). At the dawn of the era of independence, the INCIDI extended its scheme of colonial governance to the entire 'underdeveloped world'. To remedy the deficiencies of backwardness in which these countries remained mired, its leadership invited representatives belonging to and speaking for the

bourgeois classes of these newly liberated 'Third World' nations to join their ranks. Its membership now included notable figures from the colonized domains who also during the high tide of nationalist fervour had continued to collaborate with alien rule. Nevertheless, the INCIDI also remained an ineffectual initiative, operating as before at best as a network of mutual trust and support to practice the acquired expertise on how to sustain colonial dependency.

American President Harry S. Truman announced the Point Four Program in 1949 to improve economic, social and political conditions in the new but 'underdeveloped' nations of the world and brought this ambitious design to the centre of foreign policy. The pathway spelled out for the postcolonial future was cloaked in a goodwill mission of universal welfarism. The covert objective of his well-timed address was to consolidate the domination of the advanced economies which the colonizing nations had achieved while engaged in imperial expansion. However, in the middle of the twentieth century, capitalism had moved out of the shadow of the protection and promotion in metropolitan-based politics and policies which it still had needed during the territorial epoch of colonialism. In the aftermath of decolonization, corporate business gradually succeeded in getting rid of étatist control beyond the national level. Scaled up to multinational concerns, mega-capitalist holdings were increasingly able to institute their own kind of extraterritorial governmentality, The growing spread of neoliberalism worldwide effectuated the transition from state to market and from public policy to private enterprise in all realms of economy and society, leaving the globalized management required to the mandated agency of the World Bank, IMF and the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD).

Highlighting their renown as qualified managers of colonial affairs, many individual members of INCIDI became consultants or stakeholders charged with other tasks in the newly constructed apparatus of developmentalism, professing to be dedicated to the well-being of differing civilizations. In the light of the reshaped format of imperial governmentality, it comes as no surprise that the platform which, according to Wagner, had been the main think tank of colonial management went out of business in 1982. Its belated demise confirmed Césaire's early warning signal that colonialism was not reformable. In his censorious appraisal close to the moment of decolonization, he argued that the European powers were not imperial rivals but acted in collusion with each other to retain and intensify their global supremacy in the postcolonial era. Real decolonization, Césaire concluded, was either 'revolutionary or inexistent'.

Colonialism as a double-sided relationship

Probing into the past of colonies and metropoles has for long been confined in circuits kept apart from each other. Colonial history used to have practitioners who did not meddle with what went on in the metropoles and vice-versa. In the same style, the batch of historians engaged in national history is prone to operate in conduits which differ from those frequented by colleagues who focus on the accelerating process of globalization. Accustomed to turning their backs to each other has resulted in distinct compartments of teaching and research. As a consequence of the separated trajectories which have evolved, academic reading and writing remain confined in different forums, conventions and journals. But once in a while, a treatise is submitted in an arena with a scope totally contrarious to the chosen platform of publications. This occurred in 2017, when Bruce Gilley submitted a controversial paper to *Third World Quarterly*, a reputable journal with editors strongly committed to the emancipation of the decolonized regions in the world. 'The Case for Colonialism' argued that Western colonialism benefitted the peoples subjected to it and was also seen by them as legitimate. For those reasons, Gilley advocated a return to Western colonization of the Third World. Basing his argument on a diversity of sources mainly relating to Central Africa, his contentious account also referred to David van Reybrouck's seminal 2010 book on the erstwhile Belgian Congo, though wilfully misreading its anti-colonial tenor.

Gilley's provocative fabrication drew a furious and widespread response, which sparked its retraction by the journal's publisher and the resignation of many members of the editorial board. The lasting resonance of this incident is no less pungent. Gilley's paper was published in the Summer 2018 issue of *Academic Questions*, brought out by the National Association of Scholars. This polemical syndicate on the far right of American academia is dedicated to preserving 'Western intellectual heritage' in opposition to multiculturalism, affirmative action and other objectives proclaiming the universality of social equality and justice. Of interest in this ugly affair is that Gilley authored a similar contentious piece in 2016, without however attracting the same criticism to which he became exposed when addressing an audience totally out of tune with his pro-colonial stance. However *African Affairs*, which published Gilley's 2016 article, was a continuation of the *Journal of the African Society*. This periodical, published from 1901 to 1944, had a mainly British readership which was, if not affiliated to, usually in sympathy with imperialist authority. This precursory background may have left an impact on its successor which must have helped Gilley to gain a hearing for his flawed views.

How can it be possible to draw up the balance of the power and authority, if historiography remains stuck in a unilateral appraisal without addressing both sides of the equation? To properly address the balance of colonial expansion and its impact, it is imperative to examine too how the peoples targeted assessed the impact of the foreign rule to which they and their forebears have been exposed. That narrative had to wait until their silenced voices began to be heard in the struggle for freedom. Gaining insight into the treatment meted out to them should be a point of departure in addressing this other side of the fence. To try and search in this dialogue for the greatest common divisor would in my opinion be a faint and illusory quest. Instead of aiming to close the gap which existed in a tepid form of minimal consensus, it would be more astute to comprehend the disputed sediment of the colonial past in a joint frame of transnationalism.

The core question on the driving force and impact of colonialism requires showing what being colonized essentially implied, once more in Ranke's phrasing, to search and understand the inner working of the past (cited in Evans 1997: 17). It means not relying unambiguously on documentation put on record in colonial archives. It is crucial to gather information and data sets from other sources than those notified by the ruling machinery of government. Gaining access to symptoms of defiance and resistance calls for other techniques of investigation to register the disruption and havoc alien occupation created. It is a modus operandi which attempts to extrapolate and take on board what in ethnic historiography is often understated or totally missing. This motivation induced me to publish the four monographs I have authored on colonial and postcolonial labour in Indonesia also in an Indonesian edition. Illustrative of the distinctness of Dutch conventional historicity on the colonial past is the glaring absence of references to Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Indonesia's world-famous novelist. His opus magnum (Toer 1980-88) is a prime example of the neglect with which his novels on the birth of the nationalist movement in the early twentieth century have been treated. Its surging popularity in later decades and the repression, ranging from intimidation to terrorization, has continued to remain unnoticed and neglected in Dutch official and public opinion. It was not much different in Belgium's case.

Decolonization staved off

In hindsight, it seems as if the wave of decolonization around the middle of the twentieth century was the outcome of a slow process of transition that finally ended in self-rule. Drawing up the balance three-quarters of a

century later, this perceived image of an adjusted metropolitan colouring, in particular, suggests that the transition from multinational to national state formation was considered inevitable on both sides of the fence. This is a misleading perception which does not acknowledge that the imperial stakeholders in Europe obtusely refused to grant self-rule to their conquered possessions. Besides Great Britain and France, the Netherlands, Belgium and Portugal also refused to vacate their extraterritorial domains. All of them fought their last colonial war with the same horrifying brutality with which they had continued to suppress the colonized peoples to their power and authority. One of the last viceroys who left his post as a demoralized man told his successor 'we shall have to continue responsibility for India at least another thirty years' (Wavell 1973: 33). When the last but one governor-general of the Dutch East Indies stepped down, he declared that it would take another 300 years to prepare the Indies for self-rule.

The change from multinational to mono-national statecraft forced the European homelands to reconsider how to realize their global aspirations after the loss of their colonies, which had boosted the build-up of a united front at home. One way to do this was to express their commonality in a joint profile of Europeanhood as the founding father of ICI did. The politics and policies to articulate this sense of shared belonging has, however, unavoidably eroded the autonomy these countries wished to retain in order to keep their citizens cemented in an identity of their own making. The strength of the nation state should not be taken for granted, also because changes to the social fabric from within have to be taken into account. All of these countries have their own history of fusions and fissions and in some of them such old divides did not merely linger on but have come back with a vengeance. While in the Dutch case a process of secularization has withered away the religiosity which used to divide society into pillarized segments, in Belgium the earlier partition, grounded in language and regional distinctness, seems to have sharpened in the wake of decolonization.

No doubt, the image of the colonial past has radically changed in the past half a century, at least in academic quarters. This critical review is outlined in the contents of my volume and discusses the extent to which the Netherlands and Belgium fit the more general case. The reappraisal has also instigated a more public debate between protagonist and antagonist stakeholders. The essays included clarify on which side I have positioned myself. In her recent study, Caroline Elkins (2022) has vigorously rejected the tenacious pretence that British liberal imperialism – the Dutch and Belgian variant of which was the so-called Ethical Policy – not only aimed to develop their colonial domains but also did so effectively. The ruthless violence

applied with legislated lawlessness to retain rule over overseas territories, were adopted lock, stock and barrel in the East Indies and Congo. Elkins's scathing indictment, documented with profuse and profound empirical evidence, highlights the étatist configuration of multinationalism. The same verdict is expressed in a parallel approach and zooms in on the political economy of capitalism which propelled the imperialist project. The extracted surplus value was drained away to the metropolitan headquarters in overt or covert transactions. The link between imperialism and capitalism has of course been foregrounded in classical Marxist studies, in particular, but also includes authors with a somewhat different perspective. Atul Kohli's study (2020), for example, focuses on how British and American economic interests were instrumental in shaping the modern world. My endeavour has been to combine both schools of thought – étatism and its collusion with predatory capitalism – spelling out the racist policies underlying the lucrative gains of late- and postcolonial imperialism.

The driving force of capitalism in imperialism old and new

Immanent to the management of *the colonial question* was a firm and sustained denial of *the social question*. The role of corporate capitalism in holding on to imperialist rule has been much understated, also in Dutch and Belgian conventional historiography. Fear of being cut off from access to rich and still untapped raw resources both above and below the soil in many regions, together with the use of an immense reservoir of cheap labour which could be hired and fired according to the needs of the moment, were important incentives in pressurizing politicians in the homeland not to capitulate to the nationalist revolution. In both countries this was in vain, though not before they waged their last and bitterly fought colonial wars, which ended in a huge loss of life and wanton infrastructural destruction.

When the negotiations on the transfer of power in 'our Indies' finally took place, they resulted in recognition of Indonesia's independence in 1949. The treaty, drafted with international mediation, decreed that Indonesia would allow Dutch big business to continue operating without having to relocate to the Republic. All profits gained could be remitted as before to the homeland. Moreover, Indonesia was deprived of the victory bonus and instead forced to pay a huge indemnity in annual instalments for the costs of the war incurred by the metropolitan treasury. Last but not least, in the event Indonesia was eventually to nationalize Dutch business, as it did indeed in 1957, it would have to pay huge compensation for the loss of

property. It meant that the freedom fought for with extraordinary sacrifice of mainly Indonesian lives also came at a very high price in material terms.

It is a conclusion which, in a slightly different setting and cast of stakeholders, seems to be equally applicable to the Belgian script of decolonization in 1960 and the explosion of violence to which this auspicious event gave rise. The chaotic follow-up was the result of the strenuous efforts by the big mining industry together with a major bank corporation and in tune with large-scale plantation agriculture to restore colonial rule. This intervention led to civil war and the commissioned killing of Patrice Lumumba, who was the inspirational leader of the people's struggle for freedom. Although the persistent effort to split up the Democratic Republic of Congo failed, the new power mongers showed themselves as lenient as their colonial predecessors had been in catering to the interests of mega-capitalism.

My argument in various chapters has been that colonial capitalism was able to grow at a much higher rate of accumulation than had been achieved in the European homelands during the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. This was mainly due to the almost free availability of raw resources – land for planting cash crops or for extracting ores, oil and other minerals – and the cheap cost of coolie labour regimented in regular to occasional employment for producing these commodities, which were sold on the expanding world market. The social question was stolidly ignored, let alone acted upon. The surplus value derived from the massive workforce was actually much higher than in the mode of capitalist exploitation which Karl Polanyi (1944) spelled out in the great transformation taking place in Europe one century earlier.

The footlooseness of capital and labour in a world of disorder

The lucrative gains from colonial domains were transferred to the metropoles in which these capitalist conglomerates continued to be located. So as not to vacate the rich pastures that had been so successfully exploited for decades or even centuries, they changed their business profiles in the wake of decolonization to become multinational enterprises. However, for the time being they kept their head offices and registered addresses in the homelands in which they had emerged. The drawback of this loyalty to the state machinery which has served them well in their booming business are the limits placed on the maximization of profit demanded by the true spirit of financialized capitalism. This means that, in the reborn climate of imperialism in the postcolonial decades, capitalist business has avoided

becoming involved in either national or multinational claims which impinge on their demand for unadulterated freedom of operation. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri point out in their treatise *Empire* (2000) that the debate on globalization should no longer remain stuck in discussing borders, impelled by the extension of the sovereignty of metropolitan countries over other parts of the globe. Invoked not in orthodox but in updated Marxist fashion, they pontificate that the age of neo-imperialism is a 'decentered and deterritoralizing apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open expanding frontiers' (Hardt and Negri 2000: xii).

In the world at large, both capital and labour have tended to become footloose, albeit in very different ways and for contrasting reasons. Capitalist business aims to reduce the cost of labour by relying on labour-scarce technology, informalizing lesser skilled employment, applying pressure for the withdrawal of labour laws and, to cap it all, resolutely refusing to accept collective claims for social security benefits and protection against adversity. It is a confrontational policy which has drastically cut the labour input in the cost of production and squeezes wage earners out of fair remuneration for the extraction of their labour power, culminating in very uneven shares of the income generated. Capital's fluid and erratic character can be exemplified by the velocity with which it is able to shift investments at short notice to locations where higher profits are made and channel the accumulated millions to tax havens around the world. Labour, on the other hand, has become footloose in search of work and wages, driven far away from home to find sufficient employment and sustenance for themselves and the dependent members of their households who are forced to stay at home. For the labouring poor, it means an endless circulation leaving and returning, because of their casualized engagement in what has been reshaped in a vastly informalized economy (Breman 2023).

These divergent outcomes manifest themselves in an excessively skewed balance, illustrated by the easy access to the powers that be for the interests of capital, and the almost total repudiation of the rights of labour. This polarized outcome allows a small fraction of humanity to indulge in obscene wealth. Next on the scale of well-being is a fairly sizable proportion of people still on the safe and secure side above the poverty line. Below these better-off classes, a swelling mass dispossessed from enough means of production to satisfy their basic needs is confined in poverty. At the tail end of this hierarchy, poverty boils over into destitution, which usually means a definite loss of capability to provide for one's own livelihood. The ideology of social Darwinism has come back with a vengeance in the new reign of imperialism to discredit and humiliate this human residuum (Breman 2016). As used to

be the case in its former gestalt, pauperism is framed in institutional racism to deprive this sizable class of outcasts from the rights of citizenship and to justify the animosity and discrimination meted out to them.

The political fallout of this great divergence has been the tendency to install an authoritarian frame to keep the protests of the poor majority against the widened gap in livelihood between them and the better-off to obscenely rich under firm control. But, as Thomas Piketty observes, this also requires a domineering set-up of the state machinery so as to privilege the interests of owners and managers of capital. Since the 1980s, governments in most wealthy countries have advocated complete and absolute liberalization of capital flows, with no controls and no sharing of information about asset ownership among nation states. International organizations such as the OECD, the World Bank, and the IMF have promoted the same measures (Piketty 2014: 534).

Branko Milanovic, former chief economist of the World Bank, noticed rising per capita income inequality in the advanced countries towards the end of the twentieth century. That means that the political economy of neoliberal capitalism remains vigorously pursued. The hardening of impoverishment boiling over into impoverishment and pauperism manifests itself more emphatically, of course, in the Global South. It is an outcome which has led to the denial of democratic rights worldwide. Authoritarianism as a style of politics was for a long time practiced by several Western nations in their colonial domains. The surplus they squeezed out allowed them to finance the cost of emancipation of the working classes at home without disrupting the growth of metropolitan capital. This latter main objective has remained intact but the worldwide spread of a reborn gestalt of primitive accumulation forces this bloc of rich countries to retreat on the universal applicability of human rights to instil inequality not only abroad but now also at home. The fabric and gains of democracy either aspired to or tenaciously fought for are being dismantled by authoritarian politics which aim to protect capital and cheapen or fully exclude labour.

In his 2005 book, Milanovic argued that, since capitalism has become the dominant mode of production worldwide, the inequality of income has sharply increased. The steady trend of spiralling disparity meant that around the turn of the last century 80 per cent of the global population of 6.6 billion people could be classified as poor. His documentation that the situation was getting worse instead of better strongly denied the tale spread by his erstwhile employer of a rapid fall of poverty in the years to come. Of course, his dismal assessment did not identify doom everywhere. Middle-earners had gained ground, a feat almost entirely due to China

where, within the last quarter of a century, 900 million inhabitants had been lifted out of penury. In his later publications, Milanovic has historicized his global analysis. What has been written up as the Great Divergence expressed and articulated the domination of a handful of imperialist countries in the West which, in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, embedded the engine of capitalism in the Global South. But the World Bank continued to insist that the Millennium Development Goals had so far been successfully achieved and that, by adhering to its proscribed policies, global poverty would be eliminated by 2030. In 2015, halfway to this finish line, the Bank launched its 'bold and transformative' Agenda for Sustainable Development, mandated as before by the United Nations. The blueprint, the bank added in customary self-praise, had galvanized unprecedented efforts to meet the needs of the world's poorest. As Milanovic once more explained, nothing could be farther from the truth. In *Worlds Apart: Measuring International and Global Inequality* (2007), he had already pointed out that in the world at large and as a consequence of country-wise reshuffling, poverty has not declined during the past two decades, but increased. The accumulation-dispossession paradigm signals a polarization process which is more pronounced than ever before, an outcome attributed by him to a globalized course of predatory capitalism. Instead of a trend of convergence, as the World Bank has postulated, his argument of a staggering economic divide is in accordance with growing social inequality worldwide.

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For a long time, Europe's colonizing powers justified their urge for expansion with the conviction that they were 'bringing civilization to territories where civilization was lacking'. This doctrine of white superiority and indigenous inferiority was accompanied by a boundless exploitation of local labor. Under colonial rule, the ideology that later became known as neoliberalism was free to subject labor to a capitalism tainted by racialized policies. This political economy has now become dominant in the Western world, too, and has reversed the trend towards equality. In *Colonialism, Capitalism and Racism*, Jan Breman shows how racial favoritism is no longer contained to 'faraway, indigenous peoples', but has become a source of polarization within Western societies as well.

Jan Breman is professor emeritus of comparative sociology at the University of Amsterdam and an honorary fellow at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam.

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
www.routledge.com

ISBN: 978-90-4855-991-6